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ABSTRACT

Noting that the work of early childhood educators is often complex, variable, and individualized, this booklet brings together a range of teacher stories that describe such work across many settings. A number of challenges for early childhood education are described, and a host of innovative teaching ideas are presented in an attempt to describe what can be achieved when combining existing and possible teaching and learning practices. Chapters include: (1) "Talking about Teaching and Learning" (Marilyn Fleer); (2) "The Work of Preschool to Year 3 Teachers: What Informs Our Practice?" (Marilyn Fleer); (3) "Rethinking Classroom Organisation: Learning Centres in Primary School" (Karina Sargeson); (4) "Welcoming Parents into the Primary School" (Bernadette Hayes); (5) "In Partnership with Aboriginal Children" (Michael Colbung and Anne Glover); (6) "Making a Difference: Peace, Global, and Environmental Education in Primary Schools" (Karina Sargeson); (7) "Talking Gender" (Glenda MacNaughton); and (8) "Play: Creative or Confining" (Liza Carroll). The book advocates the need to reconceptualize the early years of primary education and to draw upon its strengths as a way to create powerful learning experiences for young children. The text urges reconsideration of some of the "norms" of primary school education, such as expected classroom arrangement and management, with a view to providing learning centers and empowering children to take part in the direction of their education. Contains 16 references. (AA)

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Conversations

about teaching and learning in early childhood settings

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Edited by Marilyn Fleer

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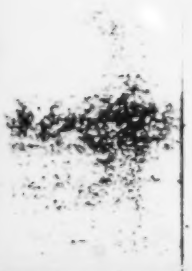
Marilyn Fleer, Karina Sargeson, Bernadette Hayes,
Michael Colbung and Anne Glover, and Liza Carroll



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Foreword

In this book a number of challenges are described, a selection of teacher stories are outlined and a whole host of innovative teaching ideas are presented.

As early childhood teachers we reflect on the learning environment we create, we appraise our role in the teaching–learning process and we analyse each child's learning and potential ability. Our work is complex, variable and difficult to describe clearly. In this book an attempt is made to bring together a range of teacher stories that describe the work of early childhood teachers across settings. Each story is as individual as the teacher sharing their story. Some of the challenges outlined include:

- organising classrooms into learning centres;
- involving parents in the teaching programs operating in schools;
- working in partnership with Aboriginal children;
- educating for peace, with children considering environmental and global issues;
- reconsidering play as it occurs in the home and in preschool; and
- addressing gender construction in early childhood settings.

There are still many untold stories waiting to be heard. What has been shared in this book is merely an example of the wealth of good practice occurring in the field of early childhood education. Please use this book as a way of starting the conversations going in your centre, school, region or community.

Happy sharing!

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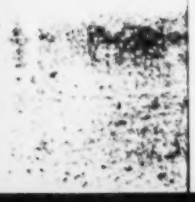

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CHAPTER

1

Talking about teaching and learning

Marilyn Fleer

In recent years we have become concerned about the integrity and status of our early childhood programs. Government reports have shown the diversity of teaching–learning contexts which are evident across the 0–8 field and have highlighted the lack of cohesiveness in our profession (National Board of Employment, Education and Training 1992). But we may well ask, do we have a united vision of early childhood education and where is it going?

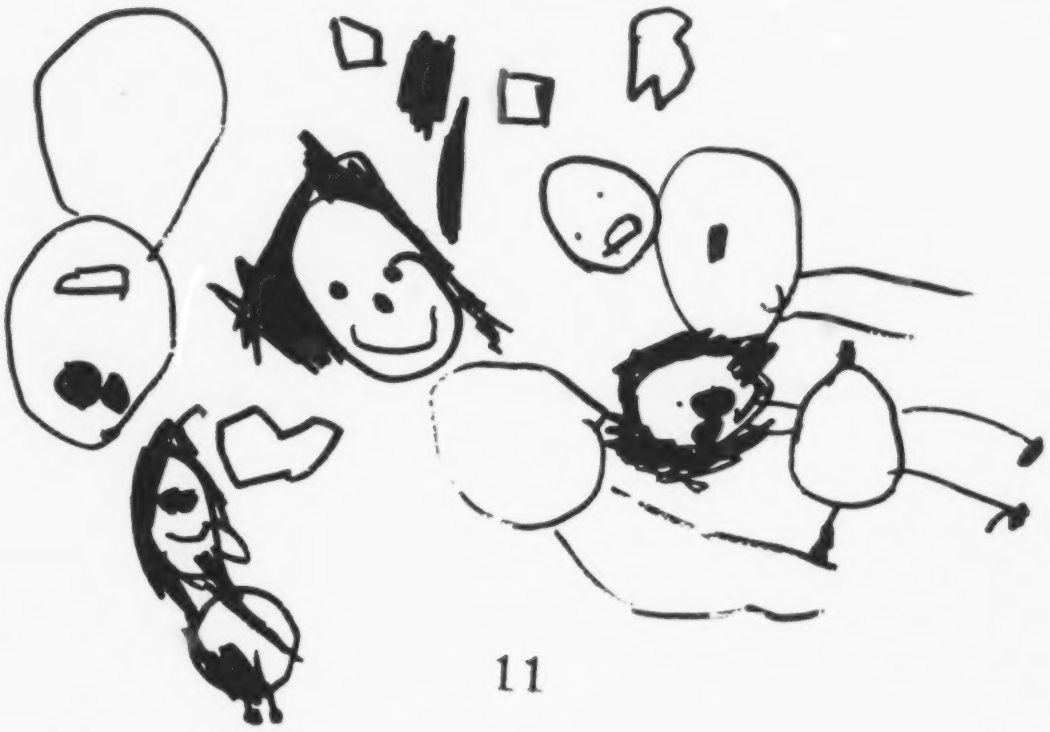
If we take the Australian Early Childhood Association, Inc. (AECA) view that the early childhood field encompasses 0–8 years, then we begin to see the variety of perspectives which can be taken when people talk 'early childhood' matters. (Whilst a 0–8 range is acknowledged, this book will focus predominantly upon the 4–8 area.) The diversity of views can be easily seen when early childhood educators are asked about their vision of early childhood education.

A vision of early childhood education—broadening the perspective

I asked Gail Halliwell, Margaret Clyde, Sue Dockett, Glenda MacNaughton, Toni Cross, Beverley Lambert, and Margaret Carr to describe to me what they imagine when they think of early childhood education in action.

Gail Halliwell — who has worked very closely with early childhood teachers helping them to appraise their own practice — talks about her views.

> *Gail: A visual image of early childhood education in action for me would have to be a lovely place, colourful, lots of movement for children, but also a place where there is a lot of adult–child interaction too. The enjoyment is not a matter of just entertainment. What is important to me is education. Education is the engaging of the mind. So, there will be some children enjoying themselves by concentrating and looking very serious.*



Gail presents a positive and comfortable image. It is a place where children and staff would want to be and enjoy being. The ambience of the setting is particularly important for staff and for children. No matter whether the children are four or eight years of age, they need to feel that they are in a safe and stimulating environment. Similarly, when children are enjoying what they are doing, the adults working together with them gain satisfaction.

This image is extended by Margaret Clyde who considers the diversity that can be found in early childhood education.

Margaret: *The picture that comes to mind is a group scene of a number of children, probably of different sizes and shapes and cultural backgrounds with a number of adults who are all working together. These adults are usually working with materials which is hands-on and who are all interacting with a common purpose, namely to enhance the development and growth of young children.*

Margaret expresses the view that a range of scenes in early childhood education are possible. In this sense, Margaret highlights not only how the children being catered for are a heterogenous group, but how the teachers who work with them are likely to have different philosophies about organising the teaching–learning environment. Diversity is expected and accepted as the norm. This diversity is not just across early childhood settings, but within settings—thus highlighting how a common view of early childhood is not really a realistic goal. Yet, when we talk 'early childhood', we often assume that we are talking about the *same thing*! Margaret Carr, from the University of Waikato in New Zealand, gives a very useful metaphor to illustrate the diversity, complexity and ongoing need for considering individuals, particularly in relation to their culture.

Margaret C: *The sort of image that I've always found very useful is a picture of a weaver. As a metaphor the idea of a weft and warp where things are being integrated and where people are able to step their own particular pattern ensures that cross-cultural strands to the weaving for both the individual and the cultural occur. So, probably, weaving is an image that I'd go for in describing early childhood education.*

Similarly, Sue Dockett takes a broad view of early childhood education.

> Sue: *When I think of formal early childhood education, I think of the range of services which are used by young children and their families. This means that I have no one picture of early childhood education; rather a montage of different services, families and children.*

Within this broad vision, a range of images are possible, as both Sue Dockett and Margaret Clyde outline:

> Margaret: *The scene could be chaotic and it could, in fact, be very quiet, and it could cover a range of situations.*
>
> Sue: *Just as I have no one picture, I am reminded that early childhood education is not always rosy or pleasant. There are times when it is a hectic, rushed, and not very pleasant experience for those involved. So when I think of the enjoyable times, when, for example, I was sitting on the floor, surrounded by a group of eager and interested young children, all anxious to hear the next part of the story, or to share something very important with the others, I also think of the times when there were tensions among staff, when parents and staff were unable to communicate effectively, when there seemed to be no time to share children's important news and when the worry about funding and budgeting meant that I didn't get to see the children much at all.*

Clearly then, when we talk about early childhood, we should acknowledge the diversity within, and across, early childhood settings. We need to recognise that we have a range of images and views in relation to early childhood education. Our early childhood language needs to be inclusive to reflect this diversity— classrooms and centres — and acknowledge that there is not a unified picture.

But is there more to early childhood than the children from 0–8 years and the physical learning environment? Susan Wright highlights this in her image of early childhood education.

> Susan: *When I think about early childhood education I imagine the children in the community, the teachers and everybody who is working together for the growth of children...*

A vision of early childhood education—purpose

> *...The purpose, of course, is for socialising children, making them participants of a culture, of a future, and helping them become individuals who can make a contribution to society*

The purpose of early childhood education has often been summarised as developing children physically, socially, emotionally and cognitively. But how this translates into a curriculum is open to much debate. Perhaps what can be considered here, because of individual philosophy and individual needs of children, is the AECA Statement of Principles on Curriculum.

This statement describes an agreed set of principles which were developed and refined between a diverse group of individuals from all around Australia. Reaching some sort of consensus on an early childhood curriculum would seem to be just as difficult a task as it was for those involved in developing the National Curriculum Statements and Profiles.

A vision of early childhood education—how can it change?

Glenda MacNaughton describes her vision—static and in need of change!

> *Glenda: When I think of early childhood education I think of women and children. I think of the excitements and challenges of working with young children and I think of the opportunities for creating a more just and equal social world. However, I also think of a conservatism that pervades much of what we do in the name of early childhood education. I remember the times when I have witnessed traditions and practices which reinforce the status quo in our society and perpetuate injustices and inequalities.*

Glenda addresses the need for change in early childhood education. She is concerned for the general conservatism that exits. With conservatism comes a resistance to change where precious energy tends to be directed towards maintaining the status quo. This perspective of early childhood education is expanded by Toni Cross. She raises the issue of the status of the profession.

> *Toni: The main picture that I get of early childhood is one of a developing profession that's come from a Cinderella status. In Australia these days, the early childhood profession still has a lot of elements of the Cinderella status in it, much more I think than in the United States. There it is becoming a more respected profession than it has been in the past. However, I think the fact that in Australia all of the early childhood teacher education programs, as far as I know, are in universities now. I think this has contributed to the sense I've got of it being on the brink of becoming a much more respected profession in the community.*

Toni has focused on the low status of the early childhood profession and the need to elevate it within the community. She quite rightly outlines how the movement of early childhood teacher education courses to universities has raised its status within the community. However, many of those involved in teacher education would recognise that within universities, the early childhood courses are still considered to have a low priority and, hence, status.

The need for early childhood teachers to be proactive with regard to the status of their profession has been touched on by both Toni and Glenda. However, the difficulties associated with coming together as a profession are highlighted by Beverley Lambert.

> *Beverley: The difficulties I see are the seesawing of conflicting attitudes as the Australian early childhood field tries to reach maturity and tries to take its place on an international stage. And I see the conflict occurring in that, at the same time, we're being held back or we hold ourselves back by a conditioned*

Beverley Lambert, cont:

> *attitude of reticence and learned helplessness really and nostalgic pullback to the early days, when our field in this country was a rigidly hierarchical system and where everyone had their place and kept it. And I guess the conflict is over whether or not we're going to be able to rise to the occasion and grow up.*

The range of images presented above about early childhood education in Australia today highlights the diversity of views which can be found, but also the diversity of situations that are possible when working with young children. *Talking about teaching* with early childhood specialists from both Australia and New Zealand has provided us with a number of challenges to consider.

The status of the profession

How can we be proactive and raise our profession within the broader community as well as within education generally?

Working for change

We need to continually reappraise our philosophy and practices.

We need to rethink:

- what we do;
- what we don't do;
- how we position ourselves and the children we work with in the teaching–learning environment;
- our philosophy, particularly the theoretical basis that drives our actions and decisions; and
- question current pedagogies which may have become the accepted norm.

Working with families

As the demands that are being made upon early childhood teachers increase, we need to revisit the important principles which drive us. The partnership we have with parents has always been important. Yet busy parents have less time to be involved in ways which have been traditionally accepted as the norm. We need to find a range of ways for parents to be involved.

Cultural diversity

There are a number of important things here. First is the acknowledgement of the differences which exist between the beliefs, values and practices of mainstream early childhood teachers, and the multicultural group of children likely to be in our classrooms and centres. Most early childhood teachers are white, female, middle-class people with Western practices, beliefs, values and attitudes. Most people develop no more than a superficial understanding of other cultures, providing simple activities in an attempt to address cultural diversity. For example, cooking different types of foods in an attempt to acknowledge a particular child's cultural background.

There are many other challenges we face as early childhood teachers. Those which have been identified above are merely the tip of the iceberg.

One area that has gained attention in recent times has been describing the work of teachers. A common question within this context has been: 'What informs our practice?'

With the introduction of the National Curriculum Statements and Profiles we have had to think carefully about their relationship to traditional practices such as conducting 'child studies'. These documents were produced as a joint project of the States, Territories and the Commonwealth of Australia by the Australian Education Council. In some States and Territories early childhood teachers have been asked to use National Curriculum Statements and Profiles to help them plan and assess children's learning. A statement and a profile in each of eight areas of learning feature:

- English;
- mathematics;
- science;
- technology;
- languages other than English;
- health and physical education;
- studies of society and environment; and
- the arts.

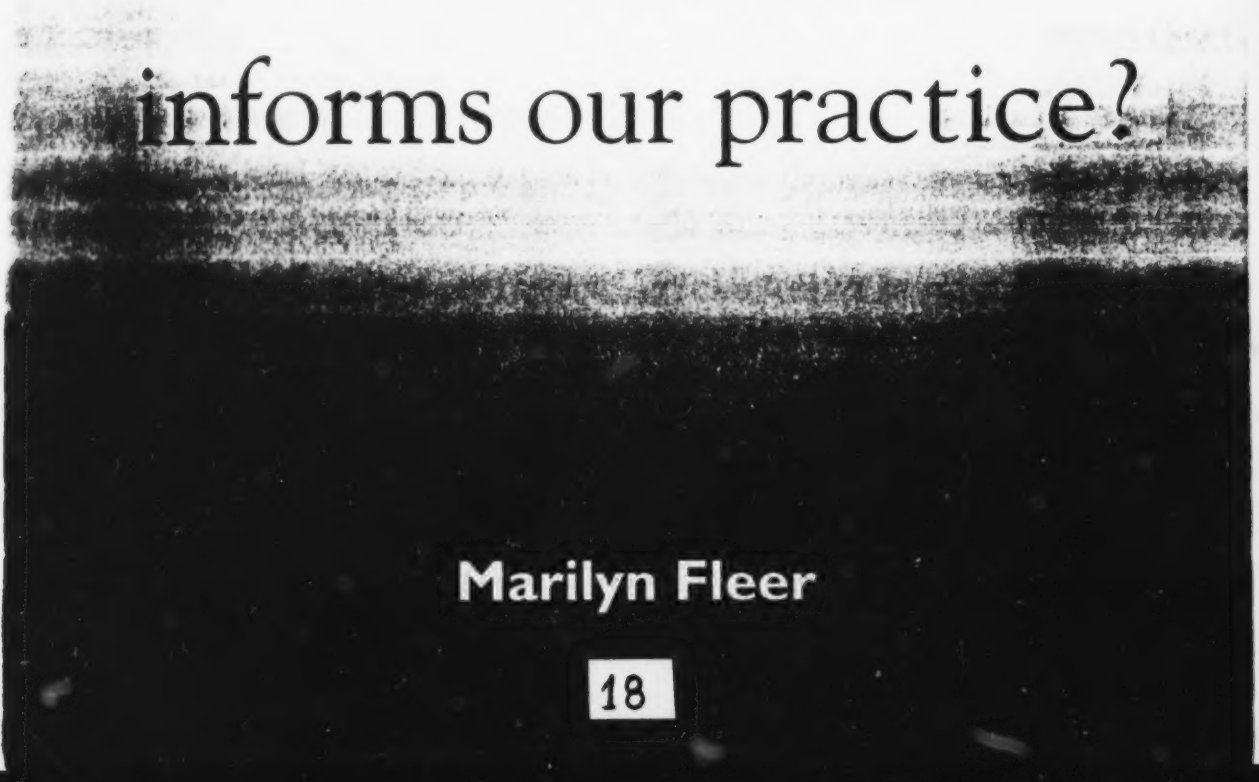
The statements in each of the areas detailed here provide a framework for curriculum planning. Many States and Territories have taken the statements and developed their own agreed learning frameworks. Although these materials were designed to assist teachers working in the school context, some States and Territories have included the preschool year. Consequently, it can be argued that the work of teachers in early childhood education is changing. We are now beginning to reappraise what we do and justify why we do it.

The next chapter looks at what informs our practice from preschool to Year 3.

CHAPTER

2

The work of preschool to Year 3 teachers: What informs our practice?



Marilyn Fleer

The idea of generalist teachers has once again been put upon the agenda—preschool to secondary school. In a community that is increasingly immersed in economic rationalist arguments, where preschools and schools are facing tighter budgetary constraints and where teachers are expected to teach across year levels and age levels, we find an erosion of acknowledgement for specialist teachers. It is in these times that the field as a whole must clearly express what is important about working with young children and why it requires specialist knowledge and skills. However, as Gail Halliwell reminds us, as a field we are not good at doing this.

> Gail: *I think the challenge for the '90s through until the next century is for early childhood educators to articulate clearly what is important about early childhood education. In particular, our belief in the importance of nurturing unities and relationships as the foundation of everything we do. If you look at the theories we've chosen to support or guide our thinking about young children's learning and development, we have on the whole taken an holistic view of learning—not a fragmented approach. However, we as practitioners are not really good at expressing our understandings. We take it so much for granted, we don't make it clear to other people, particularly those who start with fragmented thinking. It's this unity versus fragmentation that we're good at doing, but we need to articulate our understandings more.*

As teachers of young children we need to come together as a profession so that we have a united voice, outlining those skills and understandings required for working with young children. This is difficult, since we neglect to even view early childhood education within the broad band—preschool through to Year 3. As Sue Dockett explains, many think early childhood is synonymous with preschool education—not even acknowledging the work of the early childhood teachers in the first years in schools, but rather relegating early childhood as the preparatory year for school.

> Sue: *Very often I hear that early childhood is important because it is the time in which children are prepared for school.*

Sue goes on to explain what the implications are of this perspective:

> Sue: *This bothers me greatly, as I believe that early childhood education is important in its own right and for its own sake. Certainly, what happens in the early years is important for the future. However, what happens in the early years is not primarily a preparation for what happens later in life, just as what I do now is not primarily a preparation for my retirement!*

With Sue and Gail's comments in mind, it is easy to see why the work of early childhood teachers has not been clearly expressed or highlighted as important. This is a pity since the holistic approach taken by many who work with young children has a great deal to offer.

At no other time in the history of education in Australia has this perspective of holism versus fragmentation been more important. With the introduction of the National Curriculum Statements and Profiles, and their adoption in a variety of forms within States and Territories, we have seen the focus move from the child (holistic) to the different curriculum areas (fragmentary). Whilst the division of the curriculum has been for convenience in development and presentation, and not for fragmentation, the reality is bringing together all documents in ways which link conceptually for the child is an enormous task for teachers. Yet outcomes-based learning has a great deal to offer when framed within the broader picture of the whole child. When the outcomes described within the profiles are viewed as one part of a child's development—social, emotional, physical and cognitive — a more balanced image can be seen. It is this aspect of planning for young children's learning that Margaret Clyde believes is unique to early childhood teachers.

Margaret: I believe that any stage of development is important from birth to death and so, obviously, early childhood education is equally important with any other stage of education. What makes it unique is that we cater for the children's needs, for the children's development in a number of areas: cognitive, social, moral, physical—in order that we meet the needs of the child at that particular stage of development.

If early childhood teachers already possess the skills of catering for individuals, then we should be able to think critically about the curriculum material being presented to us at a national level and not be seduced by their packaging, i.e., separate areas. We need to conceptualise the materials as a whole, forming links within and between curriculum areas. Then we need to use our knowledge of child development and understanding of individual children within our care, to bring together these materials. This would seem quite a daunting task, yet it is exactly these skills which we already possess as early childhood professionals. We have highly developed observation and analysis skills which are finely tuned to make judgements about individual children's understandings and skills in the social, emotional, physical and cognitive domains. If we think through carefully how we can bring together the curricula, our child observation studies, and knowledge of child development, then we can not only ensure that the interest of the child is taken into account, but as early childhood teachers we can be leaders in paving the way forward on how best

to make use of the National Curriculum Statements and Profiles.

Similarly, we are well placed to make judgements about the assumptions underlying the documents regarding the child's background. Many early childhood teachers have close contact with the families of the children in their classroom or centre. Parent involvement is valued and great effort is directed towards securing some form of partnership. In this process, early childhood teachers are more likely to be able to begin to not only see the diversity of backgrounds, but work towards understanding them. With this knowledge we can ask questions of the documents in relation to:

- How does a common document acknowledge the range of student backgrounds—cultures, ESL, class, disabilities, geographical location, gender, etc.?
- What assumptions are being made about children's experiences, for example, exposure to books before they begin preschool or school?
- What cultural experiences are necessary or valued for children to be fairly profiled in relation to each of the strands outlined in each document?
- Is the composition of a child's profile across each of the curriculum areas demonstrating the child's actual knowledge and skills or highlighting the deficiencies of the Profiles?
- Will different cultural experiences mean that some children are seen to be deficient in some way?
- What is the intent of the materials, written or otherwise?
- The scope and sequence of these documents have been constituted as normative, but on what basis?
- Where has the norm come from?
- What research is the norm based upon?

In asking these questions we must also consider what knowledge and dispositions we are sanctioning. We need to ensure that what is contained within the documents does reflect where we want children to be in the future, as outlined by Glenda MacNaughton.

> *Glenda: Early childhood education is important for a number of interconnected reasons. Firstly, it is important because it powerfully shapes children's lives in the here and now. We have a responsibility to ensure that its influence is in the best possible interests of the children. Secondly, it is important because the children whose lives we influence through early childhood education are also part of our future citizenry. We therefore need to also think of how we lay the foundations for the ideas and values that we wish to build into our future. Finally, it is important because like all forms of education it challenges us to think about what sort of society we want and how we might reasonably achieve it.*

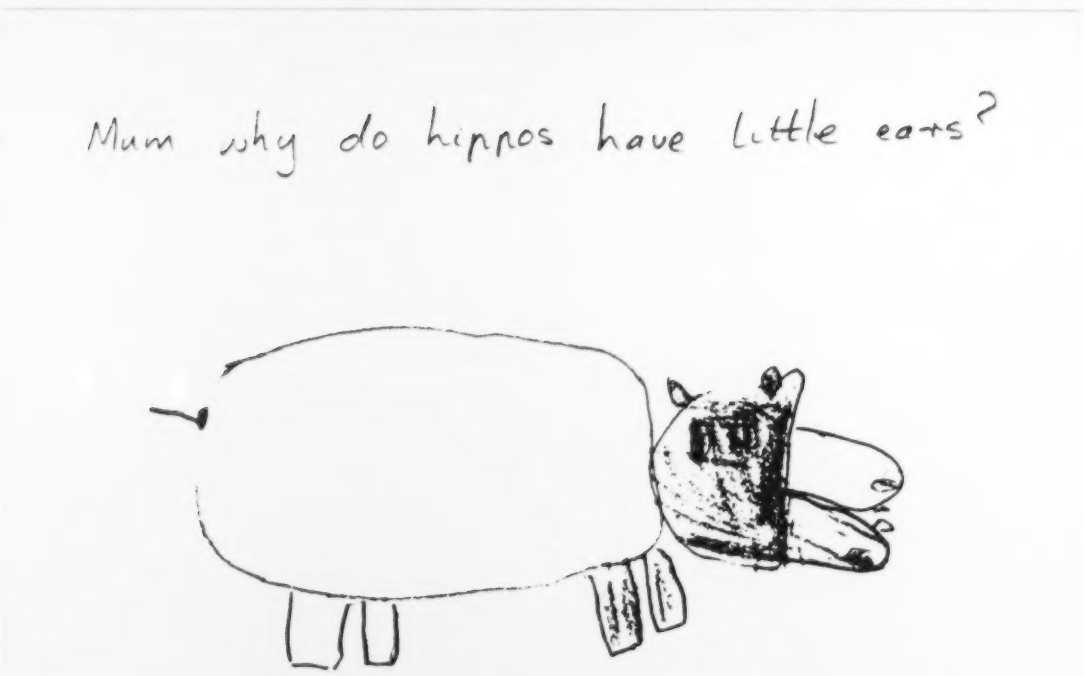
Margaret Carr also acknowledges this in terms of the unwritten knowledge acquired by children.

Conversations about thinking

Margaret: I think it's when you learn something it just goes into your brain. When you learn something it's like there's a rubbish bin down here — with a pencil you write down, draw something that reminds you of something and then if you forget it, it probably went into the rubbish bin.

Teacher: Interesting, and where is this rubbish bin?

Margaret: It's at the other end of your head. There's a kind of like a desk here (pointing to one side of her head) so if you want to forget something you throw it in there (touching the other side of her head).



Margaret: This is the age at which children are laying down really important ideas about themselves. Whilst it's not impossible for those ideas to be shifted or changed at later years, they are pretty enduring and strong. Their ideas about how they kind of make sense of the world themselves, ideas of themselves as a girl or a boy, as a learner, as a sibling, as a son or a daughter, or as a student, stay with them. Many of those dispositions are being established at that time and early childhood educators have a very important influence on that.

Consequently it is not only what we do, but what we do not do that needs to be appraised. So it is for the curricula we adopt. It is the assumptions, values and intent contained within these documents—including what is not written—which must be scrutinised. This is true of teachers in not just the first years of school, but those working with all young children. The curriculum net is far reaching.

Recognition of the special skills and knowledge needed for working with young children who are an emerging literate and numerate group has yet to be fully acknowledged. Similarly, those working in this area are yet to articulate fully what that knowledge and those skills look like. In the context of the National Curriculum Statements and Profiles, it is imperative that we begin to address what we do, what guides us, and what knowledge and skills we need when working with children from preschool to Year 3. Reflection on these issues and others ensures that as professionals we are always developing.

In the next chapter, Karina reflects on how she reconceptualised the delivery of primary education through introducing learning centres to her Year 3 children.

CHAPTER

3

Rethinking classroom organisation: Learning centres in primary school

Karina Sargeson

Age group:	8- and 9-year-olds
Context:	Introducing learning centres to primary aged children
Rationale:	Children organising their own learning; following children's interest; more cognitively engaged; less dependent on teacher; and greater enthusiasm for learning
Learning outcome:	In depth learning in areas children are interested in; children can plan and implement their own learning schedule
Duration of learning sequence:	Commencement of year until the end of the year—gradual development, as children take ownership of their learning

Introduction

As an early childhood teacher, the importance and significance of the early years of childhood has always been impressed upon me, both by others through my own teacher education, and through my own experiences working with young children. They are crucial years which, I believe, we as teachers need to make the very most of, using our time with the children to provide opportunities for them to form positive attitudes, develop useful skills and gain knowledge that will lead them onwards. We need to be educating for the future, that is, we need to be providing children with the kind of education that will enable them to be effective and successful in their future lives, in a world that is rapidly changing.

I like the following statement for the message it gives to teachers and for our children. It is a message that frees us from having to be and act the same and encourages us to instigate positive changes in our teaching.

> *Do not see things as they are and ask 'Why?'*
>
> *But dream things that never were and ask 'Why not?'*

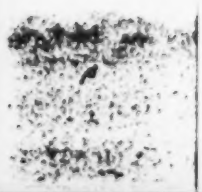
It was with this challenge and encouragement that I decided to leave behind the question "Why do we have to do things this way all the time?" and actually put into practice some of the things I have always wanted to do in my teaching. For when we have ideas or inspiration for something that just might be effective then "Why not."

A preschool philosophy

Having worked in child care centres and preschools, I have both observed and used the approach where table activities and various 'corners' of the room form the centre, and children wander freely through activities of their choice. Whilst the nature and quality of these activities vary greatly across different centres, the basic philosophy, when considered, seems to be much the same. Children are seen as capable of making their own choices and following their own interests in their learning. Children are encouraged to be independent and to think for themselves to some degree. Children are able to develop a range of skills and knowledge through the variety of activities available.

For me, these three basic principles should have more of an emphasis throughout the whole education system. They have certainly been lost or hidden in most primary school classrooms. From my observations, children seem to step over the fence from the preschool to the primary school and undergo a rather sad change. Their independence is traded for whole-class structured activity. Their free choice is traded for teacher-chosen activities which everyone does at the same time. The range of skills and knowledge is traded for very specific skills and pieces of information that, again, everyone will learn at the same time and at the same pace. Why? Perhaps because it seems easier, control seems simpler, or because it's just the way it's always been done. But why not do something different?

It had always been my dream to teach in the primary school with the same style of approach as that of a preschool, although with some necessary changes and additions to the program. So "Why not?" I thought. Be assured that I came up with a number of answers, too, but they were more to do with politics in the school and the logistics of it all than the important educational outcomes I envisaged. My hopes were nearly squashed when I was given a Year 3 rather than a kindergarten or Year 1 class as I had thought it



would be better to start with younger children less accustomed to traditional styles of teaching, but I grinned and gave it a go! Thus the 'learning centres approach' became a reality in my primary classroom, and I know I'll never look back!

Aiming for what?

The most important step for me was to clarify my aims for the program so that it was clear to me, other staff, and parents what I hoped to achieve over the year with the learning centre approach. I came up with three basic aims:

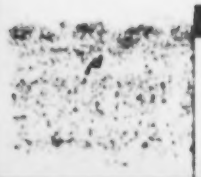
1. To provide children with the opportunity to become independent, active and enthusiastic thinkers and learners within a caring and cooperative environment.

2. To provide children with the opportunity to be able to develop their thinking strategies and skills, with an awareness and understanding of the process.

3. To provide children with the opportunity and resources (human and material) which would enable them to develop the basic skills and attitudes for the future.

After further thinking I realised that there would be important outcomes which would stem from my three broad aims. They were:

- critical thinking
- evaluation and analysis skills
- application of ideas
- problem-solving strategies
- creativity
- organisational and presentation skills
- information technology
- research skills
- communication skills
- cooperation
- care and concern.



Getting set and ready

There were four main elements forming the basis for my yearlong program. These were:

- learning centres time
- planning and reflecting on learning centres
- whole-class learning times
- thinking hats.

My weekly program incorporated all of these elements. I found that all curriculum areas and requirements were covered (and more!). I felt that my aims were achieved over the year (and more!). The children were always interested and enthusiastic. I will explain each area of the program in more detail.

The learning centres

First of all I had to physically set up the learning centres. I simply made five areas in the room, defined by various arrangements of tables and cupboards. Each area was defined and appropriate resources and materials provided. The areas were:

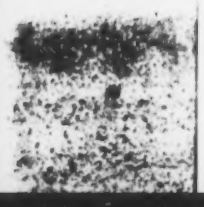
- social studies
- language
- maths
- science and technology
- creative arts.

Upon reflection I would define the areas differently now, to be more in line with the national profiles (e.g., separate science from technology). I also realise that the areas are more for organisational need than any other purpose. The children tended to choose activities and then go to where the equipment could be found rather that choose an area to work in. The integrated nature of their learning activities meant that defining areas wasn't as important as clearly locating equipment for their use.

In each area, there was a variety of activity cards for children to use. Some were original; others came from books that had reproducible activity cards (e.g., science books). Equipment was simple: Lots of junk materials, commercial construction kits, various mathematical equipment as found in most schools, a wide range of library books — fiction and nonfiction, with activity ideas, photos, information etc.— craft supplies, musical instruments, puppets and felt-board characters, and much more! I found it useful to provide almost anything for the children's use. There was always someone who found it helpful. The most useful purchases were things such as batteries and bulbs, paper cups and plates, and other things of minimal expense. Books were also incredibly important and we could never have too many!

The next step was to introduce the children to the learning centres. They had some time to prowl around and investigate and we spent time as a class discussing the approach. I believe that it is important for children to own and understand their learning and I believe that they are capable of taking responsibility for, and evaluating, their learning. With these beliefs in mind I openly discussed the purposes of the learning centres. We discussed why different skills are important, why knowledge is useful and why positive attitudes are essential. We talked about how we could achieve what we wanted to achieve both as a group and individually. Such discussion continued throughout the year, helping us to remain focused.

After this the children were free to use the learning centres, choosing their own activities and directing their own learning. The enthusiasm and excitement was incredible. It was as though they had been 'set free' and were enjoying every minute of it! Throughout the



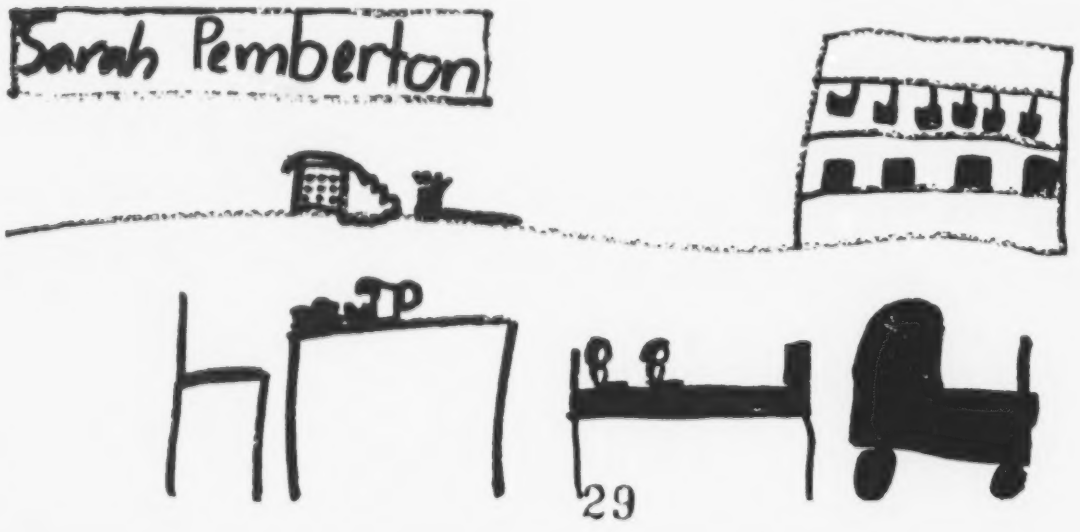
year I was able to observe many changes in the children's use of the learning centres as their independence grew. The positive outcomes were numerous, but more on that later. The only thing I changed about the learning centres over the year was the equipment, so that there was some variety. The children never grew tired of the room nor the approach, rather they were devastated if anything else had to happen instead of learning centres time!

Planning and reflecting on learning centres

A very important part of the program was the planning and reflecting. Each child had an exercise book known as their 'daily diary'. Prior to each session in the learning centres they had to plan the activities they were going to engage in and share it with me. This served two purposes. Firstly the children developed the ability to plan ahead and make clear choices rather than move randomly from activity to activity. They were able to choose an activity for a reason and complete it before moving on. They also learnt to include in their plans activities from previous days they needed to finish. They also learnt to be organised in regard to planning activities which involved group work so that everyone planned to do the same thing at the same time.

Secondly, as they shared their plans with me, we could discuss the usefulness of the activity. I would ask 'What will you learn from this activity?' In my mind almost anything was valuable but it was important that the children learnt to articulate this themselves. Whilst this made the children accountable to me it also led to great independence and accountability to one another. I would hear children talking to each other about the value of different activities. They really took on the responsibility for their own learning realising that they could determine what they learnt and how much they learnt through their activities. I could also discuss with the children the need to choose a new activity if they were choosing the same activity day after day. Again we would discuss their potential learning outcomes.

The crucial element in all of this is that each child is an individual and is treated accordingly. There wasn't one rule that everyone adhered to. Expectations were high but they were different for each child. All children were expected to work hard and to do their very best, whatever that may be. All children were free to engage in the activities which interested them most, whether that was a month-long project or



several short activities each day. Children had their favourite activities and that was fine. I learnt to develop strategies for helping a child make the most of a preferred activity through introducing a related activity that used some different knowledge or skills. For example, when children invented a new creation, they had to write an explanation to display beside it so that everyone could learn about it. Thus children who tended to avoid writing activities did write and enjoyed it. They also enjoyed publishing their writing on the computer and reading it to others.

After each session in the learning centres children reflected on their learning, again in their daily diaries. Initially children tended to write what they had enjoyed, but over time they developed the ability to reflect on their activities and identify what they had actually learnt that day. They shared their reflections with me and we would discuss them. This helped them to clarify their ideas and see new things. It was also a good opportunity to discuss such things as punctuation!

Once or twice a term we would have a whole-class evaluation of the learning centres. We would discuss how people were using specific areas, the setup, any problems that may arise, and most importantly what sorts of things everyone had learnt or improved in. As a teacher, I found this exciting. At our midyear evaluation the children's comments impressed and delighted me. These 8-year-olds said such things as:

'I feel much more confident to try new things and do things I have never done before.'

'I love working with others because we all share our ideas and come up with something really good.'

'I think I have got better at inventing things and sharing my inventions with other people. I want to invent things in the future.'

'I like being responsible for my own learning.'

'I think that everyone has a lot of creative ideas and it is good to be able to try them out and see what everyone does.'

Such comments certainly make it all worthwhile!

As a class we also had a weekly sharing time. The children had the opportunity to perform dances and dramas, show their artwork, explain their inventions, share their projects, discuss the results of experiments and generally share with the class anything they had been doing during the week. This was a popular, entertaining and informative event each week. The greatest outcomes were the increased confidence the children had to stand out the front and share with others and the development of clear communication skills.

Whole class learning times

A part of each day was spent in whole-class learning activities. We had a fitness and sport program, an area not covered in the learning centres. Each day we had a language or maths lesson as a class. The emphasis in maths was to cover the basic concepts for the year level. The emphasis in language was to give children the skills for language use in all genres and to give

input in areas that were needed by children in their learning centre activities. We also had a social studies focus and a science focus for each term. These were usually chosen based on interests and needs in the learning centres. Children frequently took up strands from these units for their own investigation in the learning centres.

All of these whole class sessions were fairly intensive times of input with significant learning outcomes. They also gave the class a sense of learning together in some areas through whole-class projects and activities as well as branching out in different ways during learning centres. I found it very valuable to be able to spend time with individuals and small groups during learning centres times, following up concepts and skills from the whole-class sessions.

Thinking hats

Each week we came together as a class to talk about thinking and learning (utilising a great many of de Bono's ideas). This was important in enabling children to develop an awareness and understanding of their own thinking processes and strategies. The content and direction was varied, based sometimes on content I felt was important and other times on children's own questions and discussion. Through whole-class discussions, individual writing, drama and cooperative group work we looked at such topics as:

- What is learning?
- How do I learn best?
- What is a good learning environment?
- Why is learning important?
- How do I think?
- What are the different kinds of thinking?
- What helps me learn?
- What am I best at learning and why?
- What does it mean to be creative?
- Will I ever stop learning?

I found these sessions fascinating in terms of the insights they gave me into children's thinking and also in the development of their ideas. An immediate outcome was their ability to identify their own learning in the learning centres and their ability to articulate their thoughts and ideas. Another important outcome was the nature and level of conversation that the children engaged in quite freely. It is clear that children are always capable of understanding more that we ever think.

Meeting the aims

With these four elements in the program, each day flowed smoothly, gradually achieving the initial aims for the program. Looking back *blows my mind* a little. In a sense I knew so little to begin with and I really only began the ball rolling. The approach gained its own momentum and exploded into directions unthought of. I was clear about what I wanted to achieve and so any opportunity to do so effectively, was seized enthusiastically. Ideas came from the children, from professional development, or from sudden impulses which seem to come sometimes.

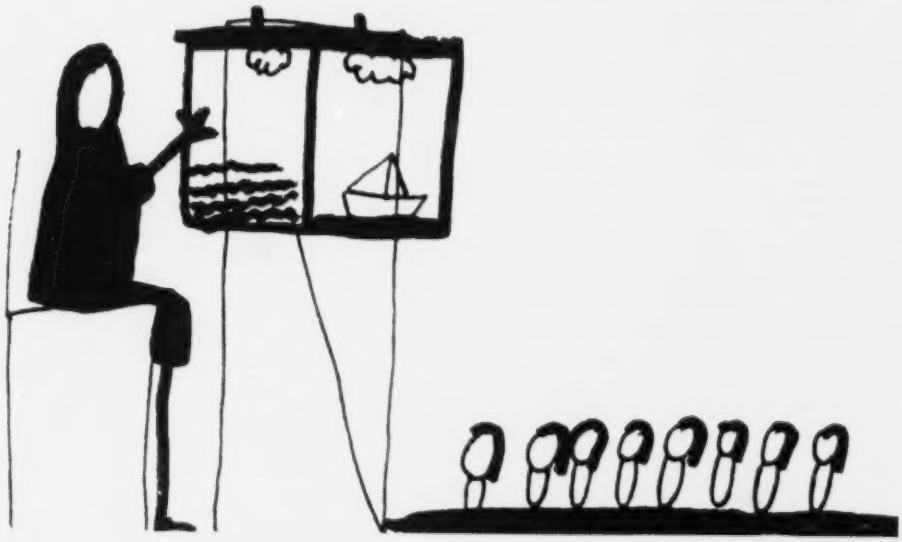
Some of the unexpected outcomes will now become my future aims for the approach, as I have seen what can be achieved, and the incredible changes and development in individual children. Two of the most significant unexpected outcomes were self-esteem and ongoing enthusiasm.

Self-esteem

The growth in children's self-esteem over the year was one of the most valuable outcomes I could have hoped for. With quite a number of children with low self-esteem in the class combined with difficult home lives, building their confidence and opinion of themselves was an ongoing challenge. It was this very thing that was commented on most by other staff who had known the children previously. There are a few children who stand out as having changed dramatically and many others whose confidence grew slowly and quietly over the year.

I believe that the learning centres approach gave the children the following opportunities which, when combined with a classroom environment that holds love, support and acceptance as the highest priority, can't but help develop high self-esteem:

- Freedom to choose activities at your own level.
- Time to complete any activity.
- Pressure-free learning.
- Freedom to repeat an activity as often as necessary.
- Opportunities to work with others.
- More teacher time.
- Genuine interest from others in what you are doing.
- A safe environment to share what you have done.
- The chance to discover what you are best at and do it often.
- Freedom to be creative and so come up with something new to share.
- A chance to quietly observe other people doing things and realise that perhaps you could do that too.
- Safe environment for taking risks.
- A reason to love school and love learning.



Ongoing Enthusiasm

I was delighted with the ongoing enthusiasm displayed by the children. This was also commented on by the parents. I think it was this that finally sold the approach to the parents. Two things made me realise just how keen the children were to spend time using the learning centres. Firstly, there were a couple of occasions when I suggested we have a whole-class vote on what we would do for the afternoon. Every time, learning centres won out overwhelmingly over any other activity. Secondly, the children began planning things to do at school when they were at home in bed. One child even replaced the usual bedtime story with discussions with mum on ideas for activities they wanted to do the next day in the learning centres! Other children continued experiments, begun at school, at home on the weekends—to the parents' delight or horror!!

It makes a difference

I am as committed to learning centres as the children are and look forward to refining and developing it over my teaching career. Whilst I am sure that there will always be new initiatives and ideas to incorporate into the approach, I cannot think of anything that could replace it, or anything else that achieves so much for the individual children and for the whole-class atmosphere and outlook. The learning centre approach to education certainly makes a difference in the children and how they value education. I only wish that these children could continue to develop in the way they have begun to over this year.

For the children in my classroom, schooling became something they loved and looked forward to. Learning became thoroughly enjoyable and exciting. They embraced wholeheartedly the opportunity to be responsible and self-directed in their own learning.

Instead of children stuck at desks doing as they were told, they became people with ideas, enthusiasm and initiative. They became children with the confidence and skills to communicate their ideas effectively. And most importantly of all they became children who felt good about themselves, their achievements, and their ability to do something positive and exciting with their lives in the future. I look forward to seeing what it is.

CHAPTER

4

Welcoming parents into the primary school

Bernadette Hayes

Age group: 5- and 6-year-olds

Context: Working with families to support children's learning

Rationale: The child's home is her/his first learning environment; linking home and school are important for facilitating meaningful learning; reducing adult–child ratios

Learning outcome: Establishing common knowledge; building children's self-esteem

Duration of learning sequence: Commencement of year until the end of the year—gradual development, as families feel comfortable

Introduction

Over the last three years it has become evident to me that many educators are apprehensive about parental involvement in the classroom. Likewise many parents experience a number of feelings, for example, they feel unwelcome—as though they have nothing to contribute to a program, and as though they are being evaluated when they come into the classroom.

The prevailing negative attitude and feeling towards parental involvement is extremely alarming. Schools should provide a natural progression for the child from the home, preschool and child care environments. Transition should be less traumatic when differences between these environments are reduced and children experience less change as they move from one sector to another.

In many preschool and child care situations, parents play a valuable and important role, participating in many facets of these programs. This does not appear to be the case in many early childhood and primary classrooms. In many of these situations it seems that parents are just a nuisance.

This is my story about what I have done to foster parent participation in the primary classroom.

My prior experience

Prior to my appointment to the Mount Rogers Community School as the Kindergarten teacher (first year of school in the ACT) I worked at the Wiradjuri preschool/child care centre at the University of Canberra. Wiradjuri was my first introduction to teaching in the educational arena. Parents enrolled their children at the centre for a range of reasons including work commitments, study commitments and for time out. Due to the physical placement of the centre and the variety of reasons for attendance, parent participation in the program was high. The parents were involved in many different aspects of the program, for example:

- policy development;
- assisting with the budget;
- implementation of different aspects of the program; and
- assistance with social outings.

In the child care arena there is the potential to develop strong relationships with *all* the parents at both a professional and personal level. The parents build a strong trust and respect for staff. I found this to be a crucial element for my program, particularly in communicating with parents, as it meant that parents dealt directly with me and we were able to solve difficulties as they arose.

You can well imagine my shock and surprise when I entered my new position within the public education system and found that parent involvement was little more than parents waiting outside of the classroom, catching a glimpse of their child through the window.

From day one I became involved with parents at both a personal and professional level, and had them signing up to assist in the implementation of many facets of my program. I believe strongly that parental involvement is one way of coping with the large student/teacher

ratios faced within the public education system. I had moved from a situation where the ratios had been one adult to 12 children to a situation where in my first year of teaching I had 25 children, and the next year I had 33 children with one teacher. Over the last two years I have had one or two parents in the room at most times assisting with:

- setting up displays
- changing readers
- reading 1:1
- reading with small groups
- assisting with process writing
- publishing children's stories
- hands-on maths activities
- science and technology exercises
- social education
- storytelling
- cooking
- music and movement
- art
- teaching a second language
- physical education
  —ball skills, games skills, and dance.

Ready, set go!

At the beginning of the term I always send home a note to all families asking if they would like to assist with the implementation of the program in my room in any way.

The note begins with a brief introduction about myself and a copy of our weekly timetable. Then there is space for the parents to record their name, special areas of interest, areas they are specifically interested in assisting with , and when they are available to help.

Parental Involvement

Welcome to 'The Enchanted Woods'. I hope you and your child have a happy and productive year. I'm Bernadette Hayes and I've been teaching at Mount Rogers-Melba Campus for three years now. To date all of my teaching experience has been in the early years of schooling.

I believe very strongly in parental involvement and have an open door policy where parents are welcome to pop in and assist at any time. I hope to have parents assisting in the program by week three this term.

Timetable

If any family members have a special talent or interest that could be shared with the children, I would be delighted for you to come in and share this with us and enrich our program.

- Do you have a second language?
- Do you play a musical instrument?
- Do you sew, knit, spin or weave?
- Do you have a special interest in carpentry, painting, or any other arts?
- Do you have a special interest in cooking?
- Do you have skills in typing or word processing?
- Would you be prepared to share your skills or special interest with us?
- When would you be able to assist?

(A copy of my timetable is provided also)

Your cooperation, interest, participation and support help to make our program more effective and worthwhile.

Thank you

Bernadette

Orientation

When parents first request to assist in the classroom a brief orientation is given so that they are clear about the task, its implementation, and their responsibility. This can either be done with parents on an individual basis or in small groups.

On occasions problems have arisen with regard to parent participation. At these times you feel like throwing it all in because it seems that you are unable to please anyone. Ultimately the benefits outweigh the difficulties. Some of the challenges I have faced have included:

- Differences in philosophical beliefs
- Confidentiality
- Personal Beliefs

Differences in philosophical beliefs

I found that if parents had older siblings who had had other teachers, or had attended other schools, they tended to come with definite preconceived ideas as to how the program should operate, the content, and its implementation. They had many ideas and suggestions they wished to share. I found it was best to listen to what they had to offer and then take on board the ideas/suggestions which I felt would best enhance my program, and that fitted in with my beliefs and philosophy about children's learning. Those ideas which I felt were inappropriate were ignored or explained away in terms of limited resources, time constraints or simply as not fitting in within my personal philosophy or school policy.

Confidentiality

It is crucial that the need for confidentiality is expressed to parents and that they are made aware that all children develop at different rates and that a focus is made on how each child has developed individually rather than in comparison to his/her peers. It needs to be made explicit to parents that they are not to discuss what they have done and seen individual children do with other parents.

Personal belief

My colleagues looked on at what was happening in my classroom and thought it and I were odd. Comments from other teachers included 'Can't you get rid of the parents in your room? They seem to hang around all the time.'

Other people's beliefs about teaching and learning need to be respected. However, for me, parents are a vital aspect of the program. I believe, that parents should be included as part of the school. This can involve parents:

- coming into the classroom to assist in the implementation of the program;
- sharing their skills, cultural background;
- helping with fundraising;
- working on advisory boards;
- assisting in the review and development of policies or curriculum; and
- playing an active role in providing ideas and criticisms of the program.

Research has indicated that the inclusion of parents is the key to a successful and valuable program that 'results in longer lasting educational gains for the child' (Hendrick 1988, p.32).

Parental involvement also encourages parental support for the program being implemented. In conjunction with this, parents' expectations, attitudes and school / home relationships are believed to align over time. Parent involvement in the program can be wearing and demanding, however, ultimately it is worthwhile. It has been pointed out previously that parents can participate on a number of levels, however, I believe the most valuable and meaningful participation is that which is directly involved in program implementation.

In order for parent participation to be effective and successful, four key issues need to be addressed.

1. It is crucial that there is mutual respect between parent and teacher.
2. You need to be able to compromise a little.
3. The children's best interests need to be considered at all times.
4. You need to be able to relate to one another as equals.

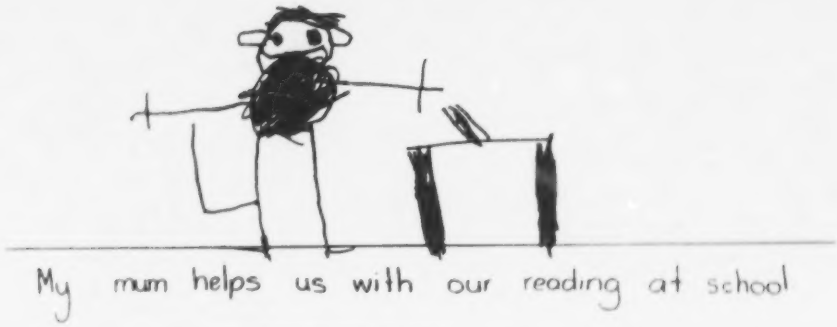
Establishing a good working relationship

The first three weeks

It is important that before parents begin assisting in the classroom you are clear about your program — what you intend to do, how you intend to do it, and why. Then, when you have discussions with parents, you will be in a good position to outline your vision and rationale, as well as being ready to incorporate parent suggestions into a cohesive framework.

It is also crucial, in order for parental involvement to be most effective, that you *do not* have parents in the room until you have developed a strong working relationship with your class. You need to establish your rapport with the students, your routine, and together work out the rules which govern the actions within your classroom.

There will be differences in personalities and beliefs, and it is important that you plan for these. Your attitudes towards individual parents



will vary considerably from parent to parent. 'It is not possible or (even) desirable to relate to every parent in the same way' (Stonehouse 1988, p.142). However, provisions need to be made to ensure that you are not excluding some parents from your program.

At the beginning of week two a note is sent home to all families asking if they would be interested in assisting in the classroom in any way. The note takes a similar form to that shown previously.

Once I have a clear indication of those interested in assisting with the implementation of my program, I arrange a brief orientation session, where it is extremely important to be clear about what is expected. It is also important during this time to establish a clear understanding of the role(s) parents feel comfortable engaging in. For instance, some parents will prefer to work with individual or small groups of children whilst others may prefer to work with the whole class/group.

During this session I also warn the parents that the children will behave differently when there are new adults in the room, especially during the beginning phase. It is crucial that the initial meeting is as relaxed and comfortable as possible for all. Think about the time and place carefully. Are all parents going to be able to make it? Is it at a suitable time for those who work? Is it in a suitable location for those without transport? Is there something available for those who need to bring children with them?

When parents are clear about the guidelines and principles governing their involvement in activities in the classroom it is time to further develop the working relationships you are seeking to establish.

You need to take the initiative to welcome parents and make them feel as comfortable as possible. One important element contributing to this is the removal of the 'expert' barrier. Try to relate to parents on an equal basis and value any assistance or suggestions they may offer. Then work together with parents to put into place their suggestions (or come up with ones which will be agreeable to all concerned, including those suggested by other parents).

Having an open door policy seems to be a vital factor in establishing effective and productive working relationships with parents. I have also found that it has extinguished the 'mystery' within parents of 'what secretive things are happening in the room when I'm not allowed to visit?'.

Whilst I do program for parental involvement I do not rely on it. On occasions something will pop up and parents may not be able to maintain their initial commitment. Despite this, welcome them with open arms and always be ready for them to share their thoughts and ideas with you. Accept their ideas and suggestions and take on board those you feel comfortable with and those you believe will enhance the program operating in your classroom. I believe very strongly that it is only through close, warm and friendly relationships with parents that a highly successful and quality program can be provided. Together with parents you build the classroom into a rich learning environment that supports and extends their home environment.

Good luck!

CHAPTER

5

In partnership with Aboriginal children

Michael Colbung and Anne Glover

Age group: All early childhood centres and classrooms

Context: Working with families to support children's learning

Rationale: The child's home is her/his first learning environment; linking home and school are important for facilitating meaningful and culturally appropriate learning

Learning outcome: Developing cultural understanding; building children's self-esteem

Duration of learning sequence: At all times throughout the early childhood years

Introduction

Aboriginal children and adults share a unique heritage. As descendants of the original inhabitants of this country we share a history dating back many thousands of years. We also share the experience of being dominated for the last 206 years by a system which sought to destroy us.

Today, as always, Aboriginal children are growing up within a range of diverse Aboriginal cultures. What might be culturally appropriate in one area of Australia might not be appropriate in another part of the country. The teaching of Aboriginal students must reflect awareness of this diversity. Our work in schools has shown us how important it is to know the people of the particular area in which you are working, and the need to familiarise yourself with the cultural traits of those people concerned.

Effective teachers acknowledge the diversity which exists within and between communities. Groups vary according to their observance of traditional institutions such as kinship and Aboriginal law, and how closely linked they are to non-Aboriginal society. Children may be from traditional or semi-traditional communities, rural or metropolitan communities, or Homeland communities. (The Homeland movement caters for the growing demand of Aboriginal families wanting to move away from townships and return to areas of spiritual significance.)

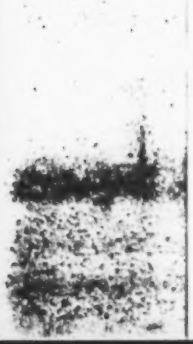
As early childhood teachers we have found that most teachers need to move away from stereotyping or grouping Aboriginal children into rigid categories. While they need to acknowledge each child's Aboriginality, they also need to see each child's individuality, and program accordingly. In planning for individuals it is important to work closely with families, as they provide the greatest insight into the individual and her/his special needs and strengths.

Building relationships

Establishing relationships with children is the starting point for effective teaching. This sometimes can be difficult since many Aboriginal children prefer not to openly welcome their new teacher. They are likely to 'hang back' and watch the teacher at work in the classroom/centre. What they are doing is determining what kind of teacher they have. They are looking at the teacher's personality traits and, in particular, are watching for evidence of:

- *Approachability:* Are students able to approach the teacher without being threatened or singled out?
- *Warmth:* Is the teacher kind to all students? Does the teacher inclusively recognise and appreciate children's Aboriginality?
- *Fairness:* Does the teacher treat all children fairly? Do all get equal amounts of the teacher's time? Do Aboriginal children get more negative attention? Are Aboriginal children given responsibilities in the classroom/centre?
- *Loudness:* Is the teacher loud and/or abrupt or does the teacher talk softly and thoughtfully? Does the teacher allow periods of silence?

Each of these characteristics tells children something about how the teacher really feels about working with them. For example, students quickly become aware of how much time teachers are prepared to spend with them compared to time spent with non-Aboriginal students. This can be especially evident if Aboriginal students are in a minority in the



classroom/centre and are in danger of becoming 'invisible' to the teacher.

Students also watch teachers' body language—does the teacher talk *with* them or *at* them? Does he or she allow children to get physically close? Are children expected to make eye contact? Many Aboriginal people find extended eye contact imposing and/or threatening. It can be seen as intrusive and may cause children to be silent or even resentful. A useful strategy for the classroom or centre would be to sit next to children and speak on equal terms with them. Also, most Aboriginal people are much more comfortable with periods of silence in conversations than non-Aborigines—children learn that it is not rude to remain silent or ignore a particular question, and may appear to be ignoring the teacher when in the classroom or centre.

In establishing relationships with Aboriginal children, teachers need to tell children about themselves. Children are interested in the teacher's family background, marital status, previous experiences, sporting interests and so on. This reflects what generally happens in Aboriginal communities when people who don't know each other meet—they share information about themselves and to whom they are related, as a way of establishing relationships.

It is also important to do this with families. Families need to know who is teaching their child. This is particularly important in rural communities where teachers come and go regularly.

Teachers need also to learn of the kinship ties and relationships of the children. Some children will have relatives in the school and in the community generally. These relationships need to be recognised as in Aboriginal communities emphasis is placed on the extended family and a complex kinship system.

The location of the school, e.g., rural or metropolitan, and the Aboriginal population in the area, e.g., low or high density, will influence the likelihood of students having other relatives in the school or living close by. Relatives can offer children support when necessary—older

family members who attend the same school can keep an eye on younger children, they can be around when needed, act as mediator in fights or disagreements, and can provide reassurance when children are a part of a visible minority group.

For example, when my wife and I (first author) moved to Adelaide for six months, our two daughters were transferred to a school where there were few Aboriginal enrolments. I advised our oldest daughter to look after our youngest until the time came when both our daughters had developed relationships with other students in their respective classes. (This type of responsibility is typically allocated to older Aboriginal children both inside and outside the home.)

Teachers who respond warmly and personally to Aboriginal students, and who respect students' family and community relationships, will be in a much better position to motivate children in their classrooms/centres to learn.

In the classroom/centre

How each student acts in the classroom/centre depends on the particular context and the personality of the individual child. Like all children, Aboriginal children are individuals—some are noisy, some are quiet, some are confident, some are shy. Teachers will need to observe children carefully to develop an awareness of each child's individual characteristics, interests and learning style. The number of Aboriginal children in the classroom or centre, the gender balance of the group and the individual personalities within the group, will also affect children's behaviour.

If Aboriginal children are in the minority, they will find different ways to establish themselves within the classroom or centre. In a sense, they must establish a classroom or centre identity. A child may become the quiet, withdrawn classmember, or the class clown. The particular identity may be in direct contrast to the child's real identity. When the child is observed outside the classroom or centre, for example, in the playground, down the street or at home, he/she may act in a completely different manner. We have seen Aboriginal children who seem to have developed two personalities—one for the classroom or centre and one for outside. If, however, the Aboriginal children are in a majority, they are usually more relaxed for they do not feel the need to establish this—they feel much freer to be themselves.

Children's home life and their physical health and wellbeing greatly affect how well they achieve in the classroom/centre. If children come from a stable home environment with lots of emotional support, they are more likely to cope in the classroom/centre. In other families where there are lots of disruptions and there are financial constraints, children's schooling may not be a high priority. In winter some children may not be warm enough—some families are without cars and are not on a regular bus route, causing problems when it rains. Children may

enter the classroom/centre without having had breakfast and without money for lunch.

A program which we developed at the Ceduna Area School to address the problem of children coming to school without lunch involves the ASSPA (Aboriginal Student Support and Parental Awareness) committee, in conjunction with the canteen staff, organising a nutrition program for primary students. If children arrive without lunch, the early childhood teacher notifies the canteen staff so that lunch can be provided. The children who use this program are monitored for possible overuse. If children do appear to be over-using the program, someone makes a home-visit to talk with the family about the situation.

Teachers need to develop an understanding of each child's home circumstances and recognise how this can impact on the child in the classroom/centre. One way this can be done is through utilising the Aboriginal Education Team (South Australia) or other appropriate State bodies. The Aboriginal Education Worker (AEW) has a valuable insight into the local Aboriginal community and can be used as a unique resource for teachers. Teachers need to work in collaboration with AEWs, recognising the skills and the knowledge they can contribute. We believe that, too often, teachers undervalue the role of the AEW and yet it is these workers who can provide essential local information for teachers. If AEW services are not available, teachers can network with Aboriginal agencies such as the Aboriginal Health Service. Teachers who see themselves as learners, who recognise that Aboriginal people are the experts in issues of Aboriginality, will become much more effective in the classroom/centre.

Our experiences suggest that is also very important for Aboriginal students be exposed to positive Aboriginal role models. The availability of cultural role models will, to a large degree, affect children's achievements. Role models show children that they do not have to sacrifice their Aboriginality in order to succeed in mainstream institutions such as schools. Teachers should 'use' local identities as

role models whenever possible. In each community there are Aboriginal adults who will actively promote Aboriginality in a positive manner.

There are a number of strategies teachers can use to involve community members in the classroom/centre. Examples from Ceduna Area School include:

- bringing local and national identities into the school (this could be paid for through the use of Hourly Paid Instruction [HPI] money or other school finances);
- inviting visiting Aboriginal performers including artists, guest speakers and famous personalities (once again this could be paid for through the use of ASSPA funds);
- using volunteers who want to come in and share aspects of their lives; and
- using work experience schemes or CDEP (Community Development Employment Program) workers if these schemes are available in your area. These people may be willing to work in the school sharing their cultural knowledge—as part of their work experience placement.

Conclusion

In summary, we have set out to highlight the importance of teachers not stereotyping Aboriginal children into rigid categories, but assessing children on their individuality, and programming accordingly. We hope our story has also highlighted the equally important issue of developing positive, meaningful relationships with Aboriginal children and their families in Western education settings.

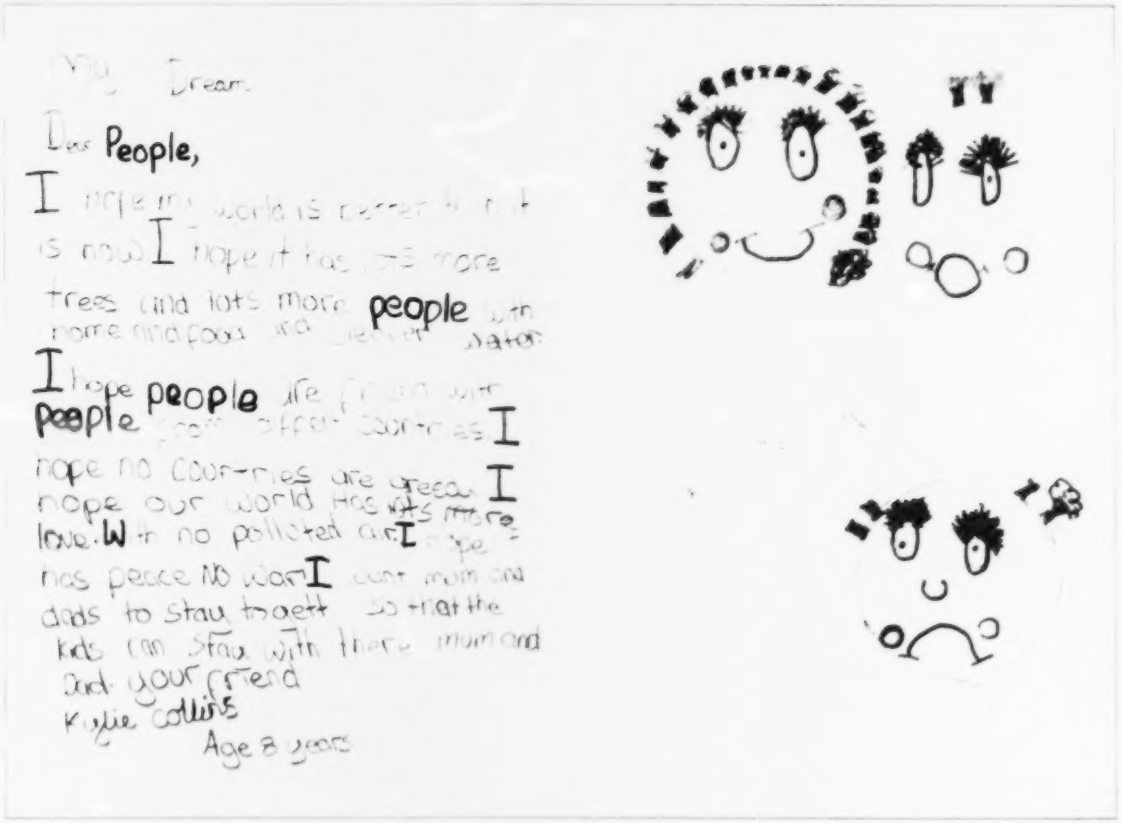
We hope our story will inform teachers about some aspects of working with Aboriginal children. We have deliberately avoided many other aspects and issues which affect Aboriginal children in their struggle to adapt to the two contrasting styles of education, as we see this chapter as a starting point only for early childhood teachers who wish to form genuine partnerships with Aboriginal children.

CHAPTER

6

Making a difference: Peace, global, and environmental education in primary schools

Karina Sargeson



My Dream

Dear People,

I hope my world is better than it is now. I hope it has more trees and lots more people with more and food and water

I hope people are people people from other countries. I hope no countries are at war. I hope our world has more love. With no polluted air. I hope has peace. No war. I want mum and dads to stay together so that the kids can stay with there mum and dad. And your friend Kylie Collins

Age 8 years

Age group:	8- and 9-year-olds
Context:	Teaching peace and environment education
Rationale:	Children learning about our world and how to care for its people and environment
Learning outcome:	Children understanding that they can make a positive difference in our world
Duration of learning sequence:	All year—or part of the year—depending on intensity

Introduction

Our world is full of tragedy and sorrow for people and our environment. We cannot turn back time and have things as they once were and correct our mistakes. But we can live now in a way that will help to make positive changes for our today and our tomorrow. I believe that children in this generation will be leading the way for change. They will have to live their lives differently to the way past generations of people have. They will have to make a difference and so change the world!

As early childhood teachers we have an opportunity that we must not fail to use. We have in our classrooms and centres children who are keen to understand the world in which they live and keen to help save it. As teachers we need to empower them and enable them to believe in themselves and their ability to make a difference in our world. Because after all 'it isn't as hard as it sounds.'

To describe all the planned and all the spontaneous happenings in our learning experiences under the theme of making a difference would take a book, not just a chapter. So I will pull out just a few, and leave the rest to your own imagination and creativity! I will do this by looking at three main topics which form the basis for our work:

- peace education;
- global education; and
- environment education.

Peace education

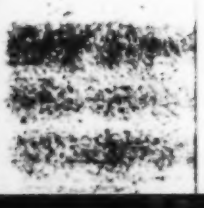
Nothing could be truer that one child's frequent comment that 'Peace begins with each one of us.' This is where we begin looking at what true peace is and how we can achieve it in the world. We cannot preach peace to a broken world if we ourselves cannot live in peace with our families, our peers, and our community.

Through discussions and activities we explored the following questions:

- What is peace?
- What does it mean to you to live in peace?
- What are the qualities of a peacemaker?
- Why do we have conflict?
- How can conflict be resolved?
- Why is there war?
- Who is hurt most by war?
- How do children in war-torn countries feel?
- Should we play with war toys? (Why not?)
- What can I do to help?

With a concept that can be quite difficult to understand, resources such as stories, books, posters and photos played an important role in our learning activities. Posters and drama were effective media for the children to express ideas and develop their understandings.

1. *Whole class discussion.* 'What does it mean to be a Peacemaker?'; Concept map of children's ideas about words associated with peace (for example, love, acceptance, respect and forgiveness).
2. *Group activity.* Each group was given a story card outlining a situation that required a...



...resolution. Each story was relevant to the child's life, for example friendships, families and school situations. Each group discussed peaceful ways to resolve the situation. Their ideas were presented to the whole class through drama.

3. *Individual activity.* The children drew/wrote a poster on the topic—'For me, peace is...' or 'I feel peaceful when...'. The children's posters were presented and displayed.

Global education

Global education involved the children in developing their knowledge of other countries and their cultures. For relevance and interest, we focused mostly on the children in different countries and the way their lives were different and similar to many Australian children. The children certainly had their eyes opened to the realities of life for many children in our world.

The main activities for this topic were:

- looking at maps/globes of different countries in the world;
- determining the basic needs for people everywhere;
- completing a chart showing which countries had resources to meet the basic needs (insufficient, sufficient, over supply);
- looking at the life of a child in eight different third world countries;
- having an 'Africa Day'—cooking, games, projects;
- playing games from different countries;
- comparing the differing values of people in other countries—realising that some of the true values have been maintained in...
- ...countries which are often scorned (e.g., family values);
- learning some words in other languages;
- sharing stories from around the world; and
- discussing photos of children from around the world.

An important ongoing aspect of the work was considering ways in which we could help to have justice and equity in the world. We considered the ways our lifestyle affects the lives of people in other countries and what sorts of changes we could make. We looked into some of the different organisations which help countries overseas and the ways in which they help most effectively. We thought about some simple things we could do to help.

One of the things that the children were most excited to be able to do was to make a flannelette bunny rug for babies in Tanzania. They sewed the hems themselves and enclosed a note with each rug. These were sent to Tanzania through a missionary organisation I was in touch with. The enthusiasm the children displayed in doing this activity was very touching. They genuinely wanted to help. Many children wanted to bring in numerous things from home so as to share their wealth with others.

I found that one of the most important attitudes to encourage in the children was a positive attitude towards children in developing countries. Rather than seeing their lives as horrible, or being patronisingly piteous, it is important to value them as equal human beings. The children were able to develop a sound understanding of the differing lives and realise to some degree that the issue is very complex, involving Western greed, misuse of resources, lack of support and many other problems. It is an area that needs to be dealt with sensitively so that children are able to be compassionate throughout their lives and develop an understanding of the real problems and the real solutions.

The most useful resources were videos and kits available through organisations such as UNICEF and the One World Learning Centres.

Environment education

Environment education was also an ongoing topic for discussion. Perhaps because it is an issue that is visibly a little closer to home, it is this area that the children were most fired-up about. It is also an area in which it is easier to do something practical about in our classrooms and homes and on a broader scale as well. We certainly got involved in some social action in our class.

Over the year the children developed knowledge in the following areas:

- the different environments that make up our world;
- reducing waste in the community;
- products that can be recycled and how;
- energy consumption;
- energy-efficient housing;
- conserving water and electricity;
- alternative sources of power for the future;
- using solar power for machinery and housing;
- designs for cities of the future;
- new ways to recycle and reuse products;
- the ozone layer;
- endangered animals and plants;
- forest destruction;
- the difference between native bush and timber plantations;
- organisations helping to save the environment;
- the effect of consumerism on the environment;
- pollution and littering;
- packaging;
- the need to protect our environment; and
- our need for trees.

And the list could continue…

Dear world I hope that peopl make the yare 2020 a better environment and cler Air And recycle more. And no petrol triy saler power cars. And flower power Bases.

Most of these topics were dealt with on both an individual level and a more global level so that children had a broad understanding of the issues. The children were always very interested in the issues and in the ways that the problems could be solved. Their creativity is quite astounding. I hope their ideas stay with them into adulthood, for I am sure that with a little refining they are ideas that could transform our world for the better!

A very important part of this work was our opportunities to actually do something as a class. This excited and encouraged the children incredibly. They saw the results of their efforts in terms of being able to make a difference in the world. As a class we were invited to help present the Greenpeace 'Anti-whaling' banner to the head of International Whaling Commission. It was then taken to the meeting of the IWC, where it helped to influence their decisions for good.

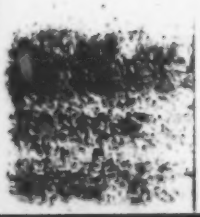
The children also wrote letters to various supermarkets expressing their concern over the whaling issue and requesting that the stores refused to buy Norwegian products until Norway decided to cease whaling. Written by the children and illustrated with such sensitivity to the whales' plight it was no surprise to me that the reply to these letters was very encouraging. One girl depicted a whale in a supermarket trolley—quite a profound statement in itself.

Words to remember always

As the year drew to a close I was impressed by the amount of knowledge that the children held onto and their fiery enthusiasm for helping to make a difference. Both of these were evident in small ways throughout each day. Their writing, their pictures, their inventions, their favourite songs, their creative ideas that they were always so keen to share! Their joy in doing and their sense of hope are qualities I hope they never lose.

It is their words in some letters they wrote that I will always treasure. Each child wrote a letter to the world, sharing their own hopes and dreams for what they desired most for our planet and its people. Beginning with 'Dear World' and signing off with their name and age, they were simple letters which would move any reader's heart. Yet I cannot understand why such things are ignored by many people who willingly trade life and beauty for money and pleasure.

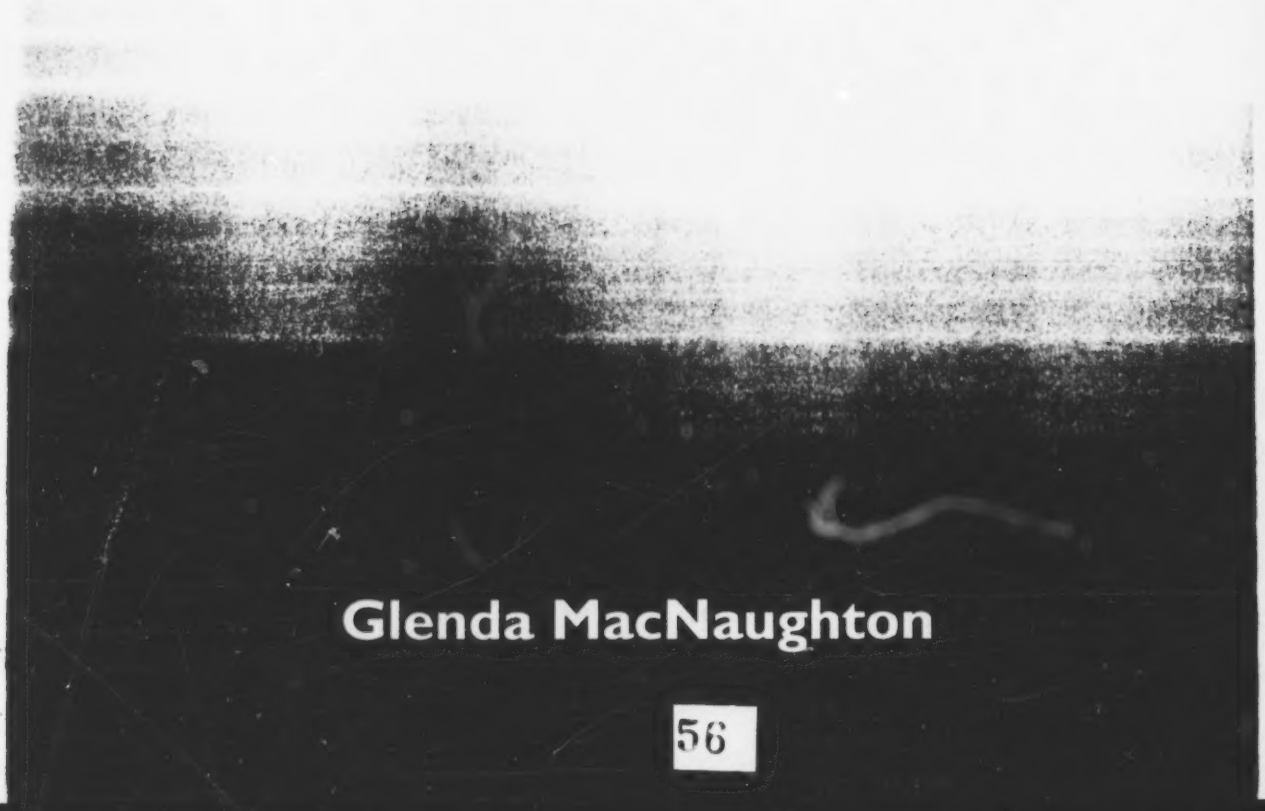
I could quote all 33! Each one was a dream for peace, no pollution, clean air, clean oceans, saving the whales, saving other wildlife, food for everyone, jobs for the unemployed, love in everyone's heart, care for others, keeping the trees and the flowers, making our world a beautiful place for all inhabitants. Simple messages with depth and love in each sentence. These children believe in themselves and they have great hope for the world in which they live. I cannot think of anything more important to teach or more important to believe. We can all make a difference in the lives of those near to us and our local area as well as on a more global level. We make a difference by the way we live our lives. It isn't all that hard and it does make a difference to those around.



CHAPTER

7

Talking gender



Glenda MacNaughton

Age group: Early childhood teachers

Context: Gender Equity Research Group (GERG)

Rationale: Interactions between teachers and children often feature behaviours and expectations which are based on gender patterns. Whilst they can be identified and named, it is harder to change established patterns of behaviour

Learning outcome: Finding ways in which established patterns of behaviour can be challenged

Duration of learning sequence: Ongoing

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Introduction

Reappraising your own practice is an important part of being a professional. All areas of a teacher's practice need to be reappraised at some stage. However, there are some aspects that require a great deal of work, no matter how good we may be as teachers. The area I am thinking of is gender. As we learn more about how we come to be constituted as male or female, the more urgent it becomes to take responsibility for this area when working with young children.

What I have found particularly powerful for not only myself, but for those I work with, is to have professional discussion groups. Let me tell you a story about my most recent experience.

Conversations about gender

On a very cold and wet Melbourne May evening, 10 early childhood workers met together for the first time. They had responded to an invitation to participate in a research project on approaches to gender equity in the early childhood curriculum. Fairlie was one of the 10. She had travelled 2.5 hours from a country region of Victoria to attend the first meeting of what later became known as GERG (the Gender Equity Research Group). During the next two years Fairlie rarely missed the monthly GERG meetings. Her enthusiasm and interest in the ways in which gender influenced her work with young children was infectious. As Jan, one of the GERG members, said:

> *Fairlie's enthusiasm is so infectious, the fact that she comes so far for the meetings, and it really makes you think, for someone to be spending the time she is obviously putting into the work in the centre too, it makes me think, I am a crank for doing some of these things, but she's much crazier than I am. (Interview)*

You might think that driving from the country to the city, at night, after a hard day's work with children, to attend to a meeting about gender issues in the early childhood curriculum is not only 'crazy', but the hallmark of a radical feminist. Nothing could be further from the truth. As Fairlie said:

> *I didn't want to be involved with anything that was very feminist... and when I went I thought, 'This could be interesting'. I was looking for something to get my teeth into, and I thought well if I don't like it, I can just make an excuse as to why I can't come down. (June, 1992)*

Fairlie, like several other GERG members, did not see herself as a feminist in 1991. Fairlie still does not see herself as a feminist. Despite this, she has a strong belief in the need for gender issues to be addressed in and through her curriculum work. Fairlie argues that working on gender issues is good educational practice, and as such, should be of concern to every early childhood practitioner, not just those who are feminist.

Fairlie was not alone in joining the group because it might be interesting. As Leanne explains:

> *Glenda: Do you remember why you joined GERG?*
>
> *Leanne: I think it was at the time when I needed something else to do. I thought 'it looks interesting, let's see what happens'. It was more that than anything else. I don't think until I actually got into the group that I knew why I was there. It wasn't a major issue at the time, boys were revolting in block play but you knew that was the way it was, so it wasn't an issue. (Interview)*

When Leanne joined GERG she just accepted the way boys were 'revolting' in block play. Now she argues that this is neither acceptable nor the way it should be.

Leanne's change of perspective on boys' behaviour in block play occurred for a variety of reasons. Her preparedness to research, reflect, question, discuss and debate her own practices with a group of early childhood practitioners prepared to do the same has been central. GERG provided a space within which this

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could happen. It became a space in which many tried and trusted professional practices and understandings were held up to close scrutiny. GERG met regularly for over two years critically reflecting on, and researching, gender equity practices and issues in early childhood centres.

Throughout this time there was an increasing recognition by GERG members that there were often very stark differences in the ways which boys and girls experienced and understood the day-to-day world of the early childhood centre. GERG members researched children's play patterns and style of play using the 'gender lens'. Over a period of several months they observed where, when and how boys and girls were playing. They searched for similarities and differences in how boys and girls participated in particular experiences, and how they interacted with each other.

Researching play patterns indicated differences not only in where boys and girls were playing, but how they were playing. Leanne's observations of such differences were typical of the play patterns observed by several GERG members early in the project.

> *Leanne: We found that boys strongly dominated in sand play. They dominate strongly in blocks, because the boys' block building is always expansive and they take over, and the girls, if they are allowed in the block corner, can have that little bit (of space) over there. (June, 1991)*

Leanne, and other GERG members, were surprised and intrigued by such patterns. As a result, the desire to identify the gender patterns in children's play and understand why they developed became important. Exchanges such as that below between Jan and Judy were common.

> *Jan: Our girls play, well it's just a log from a tree with a steering wheel attached to it and the girls use that more than the boys do. They use it mainly as a bus to go shopping, but they certainly use that a lot more than the boys do.*
>
> *Judy: Who uses the bikes more, boys or girls?*
>
> *Jan: Fairly evenly distributed, the girls are quite happy to use the bikes.*
>
> *Judy: I was just wondering whether the girls were relegated to that (the log) because it was obviously stationary and doesn't go anywhere? (December, 1992)*

Identifying and questioning possible gender implications in the play patterns between the children was a feature of the early GERG meetings. However, it was rapidly overtaken by the desire to do something to challenge sexist play patterns that became apparent through the observations. Puzzling over, and testing out, strategies to help accomplish this quickly became a persistent and consistent feature of the GERG meetings.

In the following conversation, five GERG members share one of these moments and illustrate how they 'talked gender' and why 'talking gender' with other early childhood practitioners helped in working for gender equity in early childhood.

One play pattern that concerned several GERG members was the lack of involvement of many girls in block building. In the following conversation Judy describes one strategy she used to involve girls more in block play. As others join in the discussion several processes through which GERG members came to rethink their gender equity work become apparent. There is an identification of real life teaching dilemmas, an open sharing of teaching concerns, a willingness to test out alternative teaching strategies, a desire to question the implications of particular teaching strategies, attempts at theory building, and a strong sense of support for each other's experimentation. The presentation of the discussion has been organised to indicate how professional conversations can encourage critical reflection on current practices.

Judy's gender dilemma

**** Supporting and questioning change.***

Judy: ...And the other thing that's been happening is the girls are doing some magnificent block building.

Others in a chorus: Great.

Glenda: Now how do you think you have achieved this Judy?

**** Testing alternative strategies.***

Judy: We've done what you've (GERG) suggested. We've done drawings of them and sent them home, and they want to colour them in and everything.

A few moments later:

**** Theory building.***

Cheryl: I've got a theory! Girls are more likely to please their parents by putting stuff on paper and having the finished product to take home, and parents are pushing for this all the time. Is that possible? That more girls are likely to want to please by doing that?

**** Identifying teaching dilemmas.***

Glenda: I come back to the question Judy raised, 'Why?'. Why the differences, and what can we learn about that in terms of the teaching strategies we can use if we want to get them using the different equipment? You said something about asking the children why, Judy?

Judy: I said I think I 'chickened' out. I have 'chickened' out in the past about asking them why (the children make the choices they do).

Others in a chorus: Why?

Judy: Well I think it's partly because you think that it's too philosophical for kids of that age, and it's not really... The other thing is that you get so involved in the hurly burly of the day at kinder that you say, 'I wished I had asked them'.

**** Offering support and suggestions.***

Cheryl: You haven't got the time for reflections. Make the most of your time whilst you have students, because they can take a small group, so divide your group and ask those questions.

**** Asking for help.***

Judy: You really need to do it at the time of the building though, 'Why did you want to leave this up today?' or, 'Why did you play here today Kelly, when you haven't played here much before?' How would you actually approach it?

**** Learning from others.***

Cheryl: Glenda's research shows that if you go back to their play, and ask them questions about it, three weeks down the track or more, they can still tell you exactly why they played there.

Judy: If it was something that stuck out.

**** Questioning each other's suggestions.***

Judy: But if you say the reason is that they don't have to pack up the blocks afterwards, that's why they did it, would they tell you that? Would they be that honest?

Fairlie: Yes.

Cheryl: That would be interesting to know, wouldn't it?

Jan: But you could make a few suggestions like that, couldn't you? If they were stuck and didn't know what to say—you could say 'Is it because of this, or this, or this?'

Glenda: You could offer some options, but you are leading them.

**** Joint problem-solving.***

Glenda: If you were Judy facing this situation, what are some of the questions you could as?

Judy: That's the problem, I need a kick in the right direction.

Cheryl: You need an open question which allows them to describe what they've done, and give the reasons why, without leading them, would be something like 'What did you like best about playing here?' and if it's because they want to clean up, then they'll probably say that, but if it isn't, then they'll give their reasons, and because it is an open-ended question without a lead in it, they're much more likely to give comments, but like Glenda, I felt that if they have a very simple feel about why they did something, but they're able to articulate it fairly well...

Glenda: I know a couple of times when I've been stuck, I've said 'Well, look, I saw you do this and I'm interested to know why you did it. Can you tell me?' And they will. (December, 1992)

Questions of 'What to do?', 'Why?', 'What are the gender implications of what we do?' filled every GERG meeting. The questions were born of a strong and shared commitment to striving for what was best for all children. Critical to providing what was best for children was the need to redress the play patterns and relationships that had been identified as 'a gender problem' early in the GERG work. This had included the gender-based avoidance of particular activities and the different ways in which girls and boys established their play relationships with each other.

Opening oneself up to critical questioning by colleagues is not an easy task. However, the professional rewards can be enormous. As Judy and Cheryl explain:

> *Judy:* *Being part of the research group has encouraged me to try more radical and diverse approaches in my teaching... The biggest program change I have made is probably the redesign of my philosophy on free choice in play so that the children's development is enhanced by judicious intervention... I have been confident enough with this support to attempt to make difficult changes, challenge my own thinking and evaluate my program much more effectively. (Interview, 1992)*
>
> *Cheryl:* *It's good what I've been doing, and it sort of helps me feel better as a teacher because I kept thinking I am being too radical and maybe I should be rethinking it, but I couldn't. I just felt that I was doing the right thing, giving equal access to things, now I feel really good about it... I get that from the group, that positive feedback that we are all working towards the same thing. (Interview, 1992)*

The September 1992 meeting was a hallmark for GERG on two counts. Firstly, GERG met in Fairlie's home town. This indicated that more than one person was 'crazy' enough to travel 2.5 hours to 'talk gender'. Secondly, when everyone agreed with Judy's declaration that, 'I think it's really important to indicate (to other early childhood workers) the importance of gender and how all pervasive it is in every area of our curriculum', it was clear that RANGE was inevitable. RANGE is a resource network for gender equity in early childhood established in March 1993 by the GERG members whose voice has been heard in this chapter. They have established an ongoing space for others who want to 'talk gender'. As Cheryl says, 'We've got to change the rest of the world's view'.

Participating in professional groups such as GERG, or establishing a network like RANGE provides much needed opportunities for professionally challenging conversations. Professional conversations which make a difference to our day-to-day practice require a preparedness to seek new understandings about children and how we can best work in their best interests. They also take time, professional openness, trust and a commitment to excellence in all aspects of our work with young children.

'Talking gender' within the context of GERG provided the early childhood professionals involved with support in their endeavours to improve their understanding of children and their own contribution to children's learning. It also indicated that 'talking gender' is one way to work for excellence in our work with young children.

Acknowledgements

Many thanks to Judy Baird, Jan Jones, Leanne Hallowell, Cheryl Payne and Fairlie Sharp for being prepared to share their professional conversations with others. The conversations were recorded in GERG meetings and interviews as part of a PhD research project undertaken by Glenda MacNaughton.

CHAPTER

8

Play: Creative or confining

Liza Carroll

Age group: 0–8 years

Context: Reconceptualising play

Rationale: When children play certain power relationships are being acted out—some of which are stereotypical. We need to provide space in our teaching program for play, but in ways which allow children to contest traditional stereotypical ways of playing. Play is a product of *discourse* rather than an essential element of the early childhood years

Learning outcome: In-depth analysis of play

Duration of learning sequence: Ongoing

63

Introduction

On a recent visit to a preschool I noticed a small group of boys playing a game of 'Batman'. The members of the group negotiated the various parts to be played and then began their play. There seemed to be some familiarity about the play as no further organisation or limitation was attempted. However, once this play was seen by the teacher it was immediately stopped. The group was told they were not allowed to play 'fighting games'. The boys stopped for a while; however, they were soon playing the game again. This time there appeared to be a definite avoidance of the area where the teacher was.

In contrast to this, a group of girls were playing in the home area. In this play the dolls were chastised and smacked for not eating their dinner and the girls refused attempts by other children to enter 'their house'. This play was accepted by the teacher.

These observations are an illustration of the complex matrix which is known as children's play. I was interested not only in the different types of play and the positions taken up by the girls and the boys, but also the response of the teacher. The practices of the teacher appear to alter children's play.

Play at home or in the playground is also negotiated by the children and adults who are present. Play is one form of behaviour that is used by children to resist teacher and parental demands and to challenge the social order. Whilst some children may choose to position themselves in ways which enforce social stereotypes, play does have the potential to be a powerful tool for children.

As early childhood educators we need to firstly, reconceptualise the notion of play and secondly, to look for ways in which play can challenge stereotypical ways of playing and give space for children to take up powerful positions. To do this it is necessary to look at the ways in which the *discourses* on play have developed. This chapter re-examines the notion of play—both in action and in the literature.

Discourses of Play

Academic Texts

Discourses on play have existed for many centuries. In classical Greece, play was considered the most appropriate way to begin a child's education as it involved the enabling of the free person. Much later, in the 19th century, the educational reformer Friedrich Froebel wrote about the educational importance of play (Dearden 1968, p.93). Froebel's views of the significance of play have had an immense impact on the early education movement, as Froebel (1912) believed that play was a child's work. This was in direct conflict with the philosophy of the old elementary school which claimed that children came to school to work, not play (Dearden 1968). Following the work of Froebel, a number of theories on play developed.

These theories all utilise particular constructs of the child and childhood. They focus on play as a natural event which assists children in their physical, social, cognitive, and affective development (e.g., Bruce 1991; Garvey 1990; Perry 1984). Play continues to be seen as an important aspect of children's lives and early childhood educators tend to utilise developmental theory to draw links between enhanced play ability and improved cognitive, social and emotional functioning (Rubin 1980). Thus, we typically regulate play sequences believing some of them to be appropriate and others inappropriate for the cognitive, social and emotional development of the child.

We sometimes fail to see play as having the power to liberate and transform traditional social identities (Willis 1994, p.4). Instead we become concerned with maintaining appropriate control of children, which may result in controlling the children's play.

Scenario one

I recently observed a 5-year-old boy. He seldom played with other children whilst at preschool, choosing rather to play quietly on his own. However, at the end of the preschool session, whilst the teachers and parents were inside talking, this child raced outside to the play equipment and quickly had a number of children engaged in a wild game of chasing. He knew that the preschool session was finished and his play may reflect the release of these physical bounds and he now took up a powerful position as leader of the game.

Popular texts

Parents, too, tend to view particular types of play as more appropriate than others. This can also be influenced by the ways in which play is presented in the mass media. For example, the construction of play from a psychological perspective occurs in popular texts such as *Women's Weekly* and *New Idea*. Even television shows such as PGR (Parental Guidance Recommended) present a model for the way parents could interact with their children, thus influencing parents' views of appropriate play. Through mass media, then, parents are shown how a normal developing child behaves and plays (Luke 1991, p.112).

Regulating play

Whilst there may be little agreement about a definition of play, most writers agree that children play (Bruce 1991; Romero 1991; Rubin 1980; Willis 1994). Different writers see different behaviours as constituting play and it is sometimes argued that the type of play children engage in varies, depending on the situational context. For example, Romero (1991, p.126) argues that children do not consider themselves to be at play if adults assign or supervise the activities. Bruner (1983) argues for structured play, play that is designed by adults, to give children opportunities to practice activities in a pleasurable way.

Although play is seen as a natural aspect of the child's development, all play is negotiated, regulated and contested by the parents, teachers and children in an attempt to come to an acceptable version of play for a particular situation. For example, play may be constrained by the desire to stop children becoming too 'cheeky' or by the necessity to make sure children are not injured.

Scenario two

In a recent visit to a home I observed two boys, aged three and five, playing in their toy room. The 3-year-old began a game where I was the audience and he stood in the doorway performing various acts. These acts became wilder until toys were being flung from his arms as part of the performance. This was immediately stopped by the mother who said he was being 'wild' and sent the boy to his bedroom. When the mother wasn't looking the boy would stick his head around the corner and poke his tongue at me. Even though the play had been stopped the child continued his resistance to the regulation which had occurred.

Scenario three

At preschool, play is regulated by safety concerns, as well as what is deemed pedagogically acceptable by the teacher. Children at home may use 'Ninja Turtle' play, and negotiate and contest the roles amongst themselves. At preschool, this same play may be 'banned' even though the preschool environment may be based on learning through play. However, children may choose to resist and contest these constraints. The following is an example of a teacher regulating play because of safety concerns; however, the child continues her resistance.

Karen gets a plastic hoop and chases after the boys.

Teacher: Karen, Jessica, Ashton, you are not to catch with the hoops…someone might get hurt.

(Karen walks off with her hands on her hips and then picks up the hoop again and chases after the boys.)

Teacher: Karen, you are not to use the hoops like that.

(Karen then finds a piece of rope and begins to catch the boys with the rope. The teacher takes the rope away. Karen then finds another rope and attempts to tie the boys up.)

Teacher: Karen, Karen leave the rope. I'm worried that there will be an accident. Use your arms to catch the boys.

In this example the teacher has regulated the safety aspect of the play; however, she has tried not to regulate the type of game.

Reconsidering play

What becomes obvious is that play has many and varied components, and that play changes depending upon the place it occurs, the power relations which exist and the relationships that all parties bring to the situation. As early childhood educators there is no easy solution to the question of play, as we cannot say that all children's play is good or that children should always be guided through their play. Rather, we must look at the context in which the play is occurring, the ways in which we can identify the influences on children's play and the best ways in which these influence may be minimised or utilised. To identify some of the influences on children's play, I have researched, by way of observation, children playing at home and in their preschools.

Scenario four

In one home the children's play was strongly influenced by an educational discourse, as their mother was a teacher. The parents encouraged the children to play with 'educational' toys, watch 'appropriate' television shows, such as 'Sesame Street' and to play language enrichment and word recognition games on the computer. There were two children in the family—Karen, five, and Amy, three. Karen regulated her own play through utilising an educational play discourse. Sometimes this was done to gain access to a physical space which was against her mother's wishes at the time. By doing this her mother, Dorothy, was placed in the less powerful position. Dorothy could not argue against the very discourse she had constructed as most powerful and important. When her mother wanted her to play outside so she could do some housework, Karen asked to draw or she played with 'educational' toys such as Lego blocks. Thus, Dorothy could not argue against these activities for the very reasons she had set them up as important. 'Educational play' was also utilised by Karen to give her access to her mother's attention during play. This discourse was also taken up be Karen's 3-year-old sister Amy.

Karen (5) and Amy (3) were sitting at the kitchen bench drawing, their mother was cleaning the house.

Amy: *How do you spell your name mummy?*

Mother: *Mummy or Dorothy?*

Amy: *Dorothy*

(Mother stops her house work and walks over to the children.)

Mother: *D...O...R...O...T...H...Y*

(Amy writes the letters on her drawing)

Mother: *That is great Amy, you are so clever*

Amy: *How do you spell Liza?*

LC: *L...I...Z...A*

(Amy writes Lisa)

Karen: *That letter is wrong...it's around the wrong way (points to the 's').*

Mother: *Yes it is around the wrong way but it's very good. You are getting really good with your writing aren't you.*

In contrast to this educational discourse Karen played in ways which contested traditional social norms. This tended to occur outside, as this was a physical space where her mother was not likely to intervene.

Karen and Amy had locked me inside a tent. I was beginning to feel hot.

LC: *I'm going to have to get out soon because it's getting too hot in here.*

Karen: *No you're not. ...*

LC: *I can get myself out.*

Karen: *No you're not.*

LC: *Yes I can.*

Karen: *Let's collapse it...undo this bit.*

LC: *I don't want it collapsed on my head thank you.*

Karen: *Yes.*

(Girls undo the tent ropes and laugh)

Karen: *You do the other side (to Amy).*

(The girls sit on me)

LC: *Hop off.*

(They try to sit on me again)

LC: *It's too hot I'm getting out.*

Karen: *No you're staying in there until lunch.*

(There is a big struggle as they collapse the tent and I struggle for air and to get out)

Karen: *We're cruelmen.*

Karen: *We're cruelmen, we're cruelmen, we're cruelmen, we're cruelmen, we're cruelmen, we're cruelmen...we're cruelmen, we're cruelmen.*

Amy: *We're cruelmen, we're cruelmen.*

Karen: *We're cruelmen, we're cruelmen.*

I was surprised at the physical strength of the girls but also at the aggressiveness of the play. This play seemed in direct opposition to the educational play that occurred around the mother. The children were resisting the conformity of playing 'educationally' and were setting up for themselves an oppositional play. Whilst this play may be not be seen by some

observers as challenging, for these girls in this situation it was. They were breaking with all of the social norms and values that they have been brought up with. That is, instead of being quiet, studious and learned, they were aggressive, assertive and even violent. The girls took on extremely powerful roles and this play gave them the opportunity to control another person, just as at times they must feel controlled.

What is important for teachers and parents is to recognise that whilst this play may not seem to be appropriate for these children it allowed them a sense of power and strength which is not achieved through their other play. The children were able to place themselves in more assertive positions and could follow through with their desire to take up an aggressive stance. Thus, whilst the play may to some seem undesirable, for these children it was very liberating.

It is critical to note that this play occurred away from the mother's presence. It would not have been possible for these children to take up these roles around their mother because the play would have been stopped. At preschool, the play would also have been stopped because

of concerns for safety. Thus, the physical site is an influence on children's play. Children behave differently when parental or adult presence is removed. Around their parents, children may take up a position of powerlessness; however, when parental presence is removed they may change their play completely. At preschool and child care, where children are encouraged to play, teachers often claim to be giving them free play. However, this free play is observed, monitored and regulated. The observations may then be used by teachers to map children's play through a series of grids to determine their different stages of development. Foucault (1977) claims that grids of specification describe the way in which children are institutionally divided, classified and constructed.

It is argued that children's play is affected by adult presence, because of the regulative effect that this has on the play (Davies 1989; Willis 1994). Adult presence may cause children to regulate their own play, or there may be an enforced regulation by the adult. When children play in areas which do not have direct monitoring by an adult their play '...has the power to liberate the imagination and transform traditional social identities' (Willis 1994, p.4). This occurs as children take up opportunities to test, challenge, and redefine their social realities.

Children's play is regulated by parents and teachers for differing reasons. This regulation comes from particular play being 'seen' as appropriate or inappropriate in specific situations. The context of the early childhood classroom requires the teacher to maintain an appearance of control which leads to the regulation of children's play (Willis 1994, p.3). Regulation may occur simply by the teacher's presence or in more direct forms such as intervening in children's play. Thus, teachers and children come to view play in different ways. Romero's (1991) study found that children only identified 'play' as those ones over which they had total control. Any activities which were directed by the teacher, or had a desired outcome dictated by the teacher, were not considered play.

This is often seen in preschools where children finish 'table activities' and comment 'good...we can go and play now'. The behaviour that children actually defined as play is less monitored by teachers. Thus, outdoor play is regularly seen by children to be 'play' as it is often less structured and less highly monitored. The monitoring seems to be important to what children define as play. In some preschools, the dramatic play area is placed in a separate room which allows children to have more access to less observed play. What follows is one example of such play.

Scenario five

A group of girls were playing in a home area, the teachers were staying away from the area and the children had full control of the play.

Louisa: *Here are some clothes for my baby.*

Helen: *We've arranged this ball, so we've got to ring some friends don't we! I'll ring my boyfriend. Hello Michael, ha ha...Oh darling! ha, ha... Oh, hi Mary-Anne there's a ball tonight darling...yes*

Betty: *Let's go to the dance.*

(A boy comes to the door and stands there)

Boy: *How many people allowed in here? (The girls ignore this question.)*

(Three boys attempt to enter the home corner)

Helen: *There are too many people. You two and you (points to the boys) have to go out.*

Boy 1: *I'm going to be Dad, I have to be in here.*

('Dad' is allowed in but the other boys are forcibly removed.)

In this case the play is not regulated by the teachers and the girls act in an assertive manner. Whilst this may be seen to enforce gendered stereotypes, through utilising the domestic discourse the girls are placing themselves in the most powerful positions. The girls are not only controlling the type of play but also who is permitted to enter the play. For a boy to be allowed to enter he must take up the position prescribed by the girls.

Whilst I am showing the effect that monitoring and regulating has on children's play I am not implying that it should never occur. Rather, that we must recognise that the regulation has occurred and the reasons behind this regulation.

Through examining not only the theoretical positions, but also the practical implication, it should be possible to identify if these discourses are at work. If, as early childhood educators, we can recognise the ways in which the physical setting of the preschool and our own practices regulate and influence children's play, it is possible to re-evaluate the concept of play. Thus, teachers and parents are placed in the position of finding space which will encourage play which may be liberating for children.

Conclusion

In practical terms we should consider giving children space to play out a variety of power positions, as all our interactions are affected by power. For example, we may choose to exercise power, to accept a non-powerful role or to share power. This does not have to '…enforce social stereotypes', in particular those of traditional gendered power relationships, but can be more liberating.

Children need space to contest the positions in their daily lives (Willis 1994). However, this is only likely to occur if the play is free from adult restrictions. Therefore, the play that needs to be encouraged by parents and educators is play that occurs away from adults and away from the physical constraints of classrooms. The play that occurs within the preschool will have constraints placed upon it and we must recognise that these constraints exist and attempt to work within the positions which are available.

Within preschool and child care settings we need to allow children space but also to openly challenge the traditional power relationships. This can occur through introducing play possibilities which enable the children to explore power relationships together.

I believe that we can no longer simply say that children learn through play. As early childhood educators, we need to look for the lack of continuity of the discourses on play and the multilayered space that becomes known as children's play. Thus, we must question the notion of the naturalness of children's play and look for the multiple constructions of play which occur in a child's life.

Epilogue

If you have read the entire book, you will be struck by the variety of issues addressed. Reconceptualising the early years of primary education and drawing upon the strengths associated with early childhood education provides for a powerful learning experience for young children—particularly those in the first years of school. However, as Liza Carroll warns, we cannot be complacent with some of the givens in early childhood education, such as play. We need to appraise these practices and determine what are the explicit and implicit outcomes for children.

Similarly, as outlined by Karina Sargeson, we should reconsider some of the 'norms' of primary school education, such as expected classroom arrangement and management, with a view to providing learning centres and empowering children to be involved in the direction of their education.

The conversations about connected practice outlined in this book illustrate what can be achieved when thought is given to existing and possible teaching and learning practices. There are many more practices which need to be reappraised and many more discussion groups, such as the one outlined by Glenda MacNaughton, which need to be initiated. The conversations need to continue if we as a profession are to grow.

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The Australian Early Childhood Association Inc. (AECA) is a national, non-government, non-profit advocacy organisation for all young children aged from birth to eight years of age, and from eight to 12 years of age in Outside School Hours Care.

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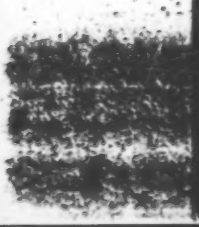

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